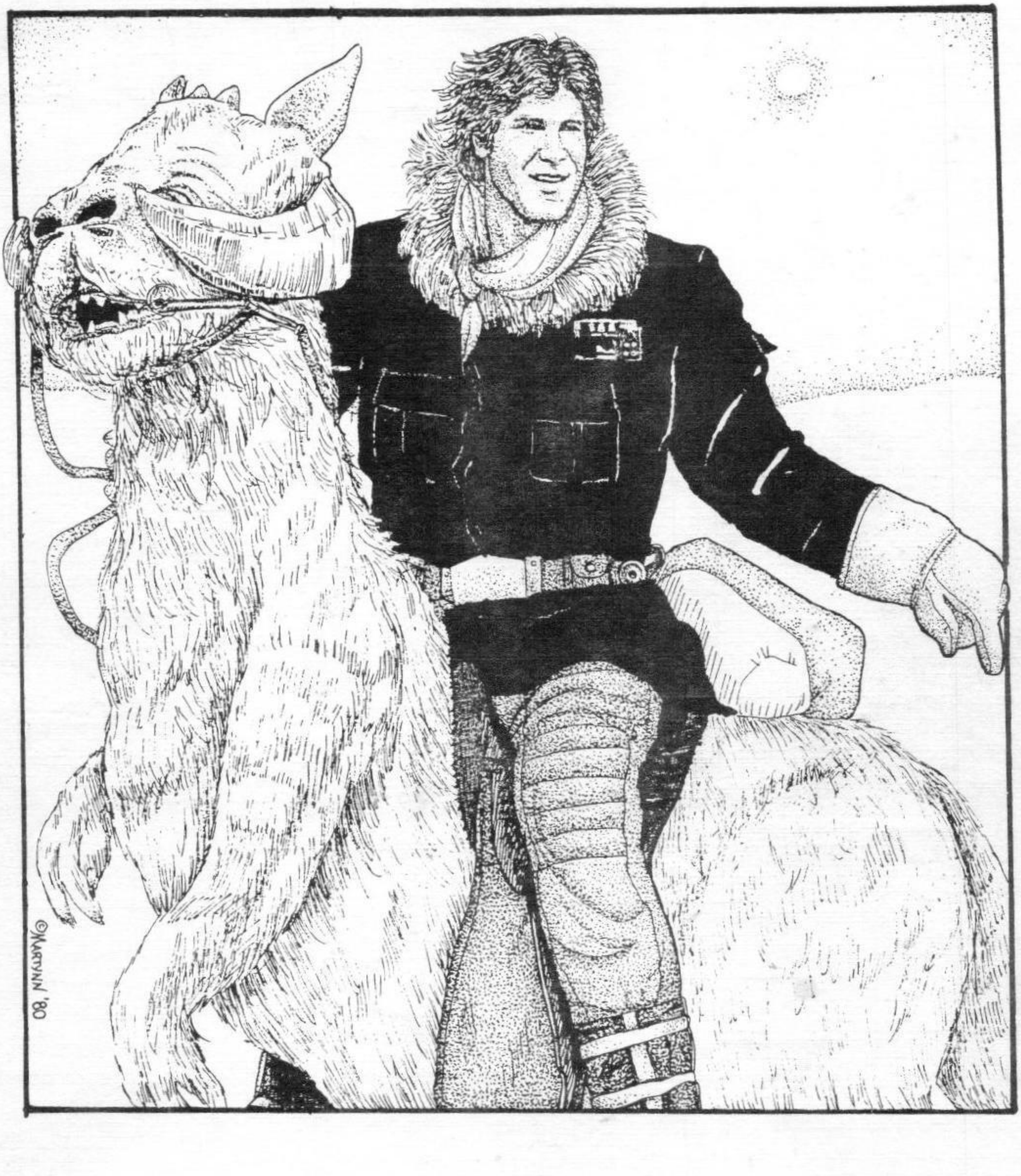

FACETS 6

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May 1981

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Dedicated to

Margaret Tillery

&

Korthal's Prize Theodore

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Shadow Chase 6
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Ye Olde Editoral

Greetings from Kazoo, where the fruit blossoms are in bloom and the sinuses are stopped up. Ah, spring. Ah-choo! Anyway, here we are putting together another issue when we thought that this effort would be lucky to get beyond issue 4. A thank you is in order to all the Ford fans out there for all the support and prodding. *Of course you want to do another issue!* Sure we do, but with school and our own writing (which has gone too long neglected) we need HELP! If anyone out there would like to contribute their typing skills and, thereby receive a free issue and credit for your work, please contact us. The requirements are a Selectric, or a comperable machine and a Prestige Elite and Light Itallic balls (which could lead to really lewd comments) or something very close in size and style. If you don't have the elements and don't feel that you can afford to buy them, contact us and we'll discuss it.

You'll notice that this issue, unlike any since #3, is dedicated. Many of you knew that my (Jane's) mother was very, very ill and she finally passed away March 2nd. She was a SF fan of long standing and a SW fan, she was also my friend and is sadly missed. I want to thank everyone for their kind words and thoughts during these past few months--you have no idea how much they ment.

Our second dedicatee is Teddy, a wise and wonderful Shetland sheep dog, who left this realm far too soon. He is missed.

On a happier subject, we'd like to thank everyone who nominated us for Best Fanzine of the Year. We won't know the outcome of the voting until after this issue has gone to press, but, as with the Oscars, even getting nominated is indeed an honor. Thank you.

We got an interesting letter awhile back that asked the question "Why are you doing this zine?" Good question. Insanity is the first answer that comes to mind. The second is for fun. You do sometimes wonder how much fun it is when you are typing your way through the fourth manuscript, you haven't been outside for two days and you are beginning to suspect that you don't even *like* Han, but it's all worth it when you get it back from the printer and it actually looks good! So, as long as it remains fun, we'll continue, when the fun stops--so do we. We aren't trying to be 'professional', all we're trying to do is give good stories, art and poetry a good home, provide a haven for Fordfen and give you your money's worth. We hope we succeed .

In response to the letters asking for our guidelines and realizing that we haven't set any since #1 (!) Here's what we're looking for: fiction. poetry, or articles on any of HF's characters, no matter how obscure (anyone remember Print Underwood?). We're easy, all we ask is that it be in character (the toughest part), checkable, and have a workable plot, the rest is negotiable. (We don't necessarily have to agree with what a story says, as long as it says it well.) We intend to keep our rating strictly PG, partly because we have younger buyers and partly because Lucas has asked that we print nothing stronger. Art should be pen and ink (black) but we can screen pencil illos if there aren't too many (it's an expen$ive process). Above all, art must look like the person it's ment ot represent. We're admittedly pickier about art than about writing. SASE us for more detailed information and dimensions of illos.

Now, for news on the Ford Front: As most of you know by now Harrison is hard at work filming BLADE RUNNER, a futuristic tale directed by Ridley Scott of ALIEN. As of the last week in April production is behind schedual due to Mr. Scott's desire for perfection. When Ms. McQueeney was on the set they were doing take 23 of getting into an elevator! Harrison's hair is now growing out from the butch cut, ending nicknames such as Yul Ford and Harry Krishna. We understand that hair, or no, he's still handsome. No mean feat, that.

RAIDERS is due to premier June 19th, the same day as SUPERMAN II, no one ever said that St. George is bright. The book has been out for some time, whetting appetites for more. Cross your fingers that this first movie is a success so that the other two will be filmed. Harrison is signed to do all three. A piece of trivia for the interested is that Tom Selleck of MAGNUM PI was originally signed to be Indiana Jones, but when his TV pilot caught on he pulled out.

The rumor mill has been cranking them out again. Our favorite so far is that Harrison turned up at Windy Con in Chicago (Oct. 80) looking scruffy and buying zines and bidding on art. Hmmmm. Interesting, as we were told that he was still in Hawaii filming RAIDERS. We were at Windy and we sure didn't see him, we did, however, place a bid by H. Ford on a piece of Paulie's art (you'll see the piece, it's the cover for #7). Fascinating how things can snowball...

ATTENTION: Anyone knowing who put out the one-shot zine SUSAN MATTHEWS, A RETROSPECTIVE, please contact us, or Susan immeadiately. This is an unauthorized publication and could possibly hurt her chances of getting her Kosciusko-cycle published professionally.

That's it for this time out. Enjoy the zine and, remember, we *love* LoCs!

The MarketPlace

WARPED SPACE, available from Lori Chapek-Carleton, 5132 Jo-Don Drive, E. Lansing, Mich. 48823. Offset reduced. Current ish #45, with #46 due for MediaWest Con. General ST/SW/sf/ media zine, and the best on the market for the price. Some back issues still available. SASE for more info. ((Highly recommended.))

STAR WARS ENCYCLOPEDIA, available from Skyler Walker, 537 N. 66th St., Seattle, Wash. 98103. Approx. 50 pages of definitions and descriptions, character development and editorial comment, of and about the people, places and things in the SW galaxy. For further info, SASE above address.

GALACTIC FALCON, available from Cyndi Hartman, 3702 Fairway Pl., Rockford, Ill. 61107. Offset. SASE for availability on #1. Tentative due date #2 is June 1981. SW/Galactica zine. SASE for further info.

THE WHILLS, available from Empire Productions, 4737 Vernon Rd., Madison, Wis. 53704. SW zine. Current ish #1. Contributors still needed for #2. SASE for further info.

HYDROSPANNER, available from Box 130, Ramsey, NJ. Ish #1 due May 1981. SW/TESB zine. Submission guideline available. Send SASE for more info.

MOS EISLEY CHRONICLE, available from Deborah Eva Rubin, 6808 Greyswood Rd., Bethesda, MD. 20034. Current ish #2. Approx. 75-80 pp. $7 book rate, $8 first class. Contributions being accepted. SASE for more info.

JUNDLAND WASTES, available from Pat Nussman, 113 Washington St., Williamsburg, VA 23185. Quick print reduced. Bi-monthly clearing house for information and opinion on SW-oriented zines. #1 current, #2 due any time now. SASE for more info.

TATOOINE TRIBUNE, available from The Rebel Alliance, P.O. Box A491, Sydney South, New South Wales, Australia. 2000. SW zine from Down Under. #1 now available. SASE with I.R.C.s for info.

MILLENNIUM, available from Elinor Stack, 48 Kibbe Rd., E. Longmeadow, MA. 01028. 108 pp. #1 currently available. SW/TESB zine. SASE for more info.

KUTA PUTA, available from Otter Limits Press, 616 Oak St., Kalamazoo, Mich. 49007. SW zine, approx. 75 pp. offset reduced. Due May 1981. Now accepting submissions for #2. SASE for more info.

MOS EISLEY TRIBUNE, available from Jan Sidwell, P.O. Box 40973, Nashville, Tenn. 37204. Offset, reduced. Cureent ish #4, with #5 due any time now. Also from MET, STORM, A SW novel by Ann Wilson. SASE for more info.

ELOQUENCE, available from Panache Press, 87 Leyden St., E. Boston, Mass. 02128. Submissions to Vicki James, 917 N. Wayne St., Apt. #302, Arlington, VA 22201. One-shot zine dedicated to the career of Frank Langella. Still accepting submissions -- no due date has been set. SASE for more info.

JELLY BABY CHRONICLES, available from Otter Limits Press, 616 Oak St., Kalamazoo, Mich. 49007. Offset reduced, approx. 80 pp. Current ish #1, with the holiday ish due May 1981. Zine dedicated to Dr. Who's fourth incarnation, Tom Baker. Also from Otter Limits, ROSCIUS MAXIMUS, an upcoming one-shot dedicated to the career of David Warner. Submissions are being solicited for both zines. SASE for more info. ((Highly recommended))

DRACULA, available from Lori Chapek-Carleton, 5132 Jo-Don Drive, E. Lansing, Mich. 48823. Offset reduced, approx. 100 pp. Beautiful zine dedicated to the vampire. Emphasis thus far has been the Langella version, but all other incarnations are welcome. #1 still available, #2 due spring 1981. SASE for more info. ((Highly recommended))

THE MANY FACES OF HARRISON FORD, a new fan club for HF, is looking for members. Dues (for expenses only) $3.50. Members to receive assorted goodies and quarterly newsletters. There will also be a penpal/swap section for those interested. SASE for more info to Elizabeth Cill, 3101 5th Ave., Council Bluffs, Iowa. 51501.

THOM CHRISTOPHER FAN CLUB: an authorized club for Thom (Hawk of BUCK ROGERS) Christopher is looking for new members. Seeking submissions for newletter and yearbook -- art, fiction, poetry, etc. SASE for club info to Vicki James, 917 N. Wayne St., #302, Arlington, Va. 22201; submissions to Carol Ann Lee, 900 Leverton Rd., Rockville, Md. 20852.

WANTED: anything and everything on HF particularly, also Mark Hamill, Carrie Fisher, Sean Connery and Malcolm McDowell. Will buy or trade for photos. Write Leonard May Brecht, c/o Bauer, Hof Guldenwerth 72, 5630 Remscheid - 1, W. Germany. ((He's got great stuff to trade, folks!))

PHOTOS: Elyse Dickenson, 43 Topfield Rd., Wilton, Conn. 06879. has the most incredible photos you'd ever want to see. HF, Hamill, Fisher, Langella and lots of others. $1.50 each, or will trade if you have something interesting. SASE for more info. ((Highly recommended))

((Insertions in this column are free and should reach us at least two weeks before we go to press. Deadline for #7 is August 15, 1981))

Letters of Comment

Dianne Wickes, 1511 S. Ogram, Gardena, CA, 90249

Thankyou for FACETS #5! You improve upon yourselves each time out.

Paulie's cover was my favorite thing in the entire zine. Not only a lovely idea, but so nicely presented, too. I loved Kenny looking up at Tommy and Han--seemed just like him. Please thank her for including him.

By the way, it seems that if #4 was the 'Chris Jeffords Memorial Issue', this must certainly be the Paulie Portfolio Spectacular! I liked most her illos of Falfa bending over to talk to Stevie in "Tiding of Comfort and Joy" (Was that Hamill making a guest appearance in those drawings?) ((Sure was)) And Tommy looking down at San Francisco for "Monologue of a Reluctant Angel". And, best of all, her loverly drawings for "Home for Christmas". She captures Kenny perfectly, particularly his eyes and posture. And she sure made Sandy really look happy about riding the rumble seat back home! I was really happy to see another "Kentoon". Somone should direct poor Jimminy Cricket west to Devil's Tower, where folks would appreciate him! I'd like to hear more about Lincoln and Dodge Ford too. You see, a friend and I are rather fond of a certain handsome space-hold star, Handelon Chevi...

I enjoyed all the fiction in this issue. I liked the heavy emphasis on the Wookiees in "A Day in the Life of Han Solo" and "The Way Home". Also, I was pleased to find a Han Solo in each story who was pretty close to the Han I know (I love to watch Han's character change from story to story--the way Harrison's portrayal is filtered through our hearts and minds into our own individual conceptions) Eva Albertsson's line about Han's "fleeting thought to the Force not to be exactally against him" was definitely Solo! I was also glad to see a Bob Falfa story, and a good one too.

My favorite pieces in #5, though, were "Home for Christmas" and "Festival in Paradise". "Festival" captured the personalities of Han, Luke, and Leia perfectly for me, and had an interesting plot as well. Giggled quite happily (and uncontrollably) throughtout.

Sherry's "Home for Christmas" I thought most fine. Kenny Boyd is my favorite of Harrison's characterizations, but the few times I've come across him in fan fiction have been Kelly's "Where Have All the Rainbows Gone"*; Paulie's "Kentoons", and Peggy's Barilla's "Tragedy at the Racetrack" in #4, can't see him doing that, but I liked the piece. I was delighted to find him again in #5. Many thanks to Sherry for resurrecting and expanding so well on that unhappy Missouri farmboy who has continued to haunt me since HEROES was released.

Your poetry, dialogues, filks, and cartoons were enjoyed immensely. I'm particularly fond of "Monologue of a Reluctant Angel" and "Day of Atonement". Since I am a sick humor fan to the end, I thought "Hancicle" was great! And as for the "Life Day Carol" what can I say (after I've tried to say "six Sith Lords sithing)?

Well, didn't mean to go all mushy on you, but I really enjoyed #5. Again, many thanks to you and your contributers.

Eva Albertsson, Pl.410, S-97013, Hakkasbyn, Sweden.

Would you believe me if I say that #5 is WONDERFUL! MARVELOUS! FANTASTIC! UNSURPASSED!? Or will you just sigh and say "Here's another one dares not say what she really thinks--" Fact is, I just happen to mean it. The absolutely, unparallelled, loveliest, most delightful supreme masterpiece was, of course, Berger's "Festival in Paradise". Tell her she oughtn't to do things like that; I mean, I read these things in bed around midnight-- the only time I (don't) have--falling directly into dreams the moment I've finished reading. I've been in dissolution for days! And with Martynn's illos too! As if the sexual tension bits weren't hard enough to take, she even has him wounded at the end of it, and Leia being unwittingly cruel to him, driving the poor reader from the last remanants of her poor mind, and then this expert author elegantly avoids any hints of cliche by making that part an instance of Han's humor! IT ISN'T FAIR! You have an ever-growing number of heroes to choose from and you keep getting the very BEST Han-stories!

If I manage to look away from the peak of the ish for once-- I loved the rest too. Particularly Bob Falfa with the teddy bear, and Sherry Magee's Ken-story. I guess I must be a sucker for the sentimental spirit, and who can resist a handsome guy in distress? For, I hadn't seen those films. I knew that Bab Falfa had grown up to become a thirty-second cop, but I hadn't seen it. As for HEROES, people have been telling me what it's about, but I keep forgetting the details, so I never know how much is established to begin with and how much is imaginative fanwriting. How many relatives does he have originally? ((Only Gram & Gramps)) Personally, I sort of always felt anybody criminal or ignorant enought to partake in a war like that deserves everything that coming to him because of it, but, all right, I guess he really didn't know what he was getting into if he was amoung the first, or something. I did meet a guy like that once. His main ambition by then was getting himself killed in Belfast--and I think he succeeded. Anyway, I was greatly surprised at how much I enjoyed that story, seeing as how I wasn't one bit interested in the character to begin with.

That was a wonderful illustrator you dug up for my story--he had gotten the eerie atmosphere just right (probablybetter than it came out in the story) and those Kythians finally appeared as the scary monstrosities I had intended, but could not draw. Also, his Wookiees are perfect!

Another thing I enjoyed was the catchetical "Life Day Carol", especially with Gordon Carleton illo.

HF clones?! That's all we needed, what's next?

Chris Callahan, 6101 Seminole St., Berwyn Heights, Md. 20740.

FACETS 5--yes, I like the idea of a holiday issue, even if I didn't get this one til Feb.! Let's have another one. ((Not til we recover from this one!))

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* Printed in PEGASUS 4.

As for subs. as long as you have no standard size the SASE method is the fairest to all concerned.

Paulie's HF clones sound like fun. Let's hear about them. ((How about it, Paulie?))

As usual the LoC column is fascinating. If you can keep close to a quarterly schedule you'll be doing letterwriters, among others, a real favor, because a regular and fairly frequent schedule allows for a bit of discussion. Considering how opinions differ, this is important for those of us who want to do more than just read.

On to the stories. I'd already read Eva Albertsson's "Day" (we exchanged copies of our work) and on second reading I still find the combination of "straight" story and Keystone Kops episodes slightly jarring. Also there are a few cliches and some of it is a little overwritten, but overall it's a good read. I especially like the defense of Malla as a reasonable adult--in the TV show she was a Wookiee version of Donna Reed--YECCH! This Malla is more worthy of Chewie, and he'd damn well better notice hitherto unknown qualities in her! Other bits I liked: the Imperial broadcast parody of Big Brother; Malla considering Han "only Human"; the description of the trooper caught by the cleaner and his partner's reaction; Lumpy using his hands to shake his head (good non-human touch!) and later disappearing to go to the bathroom. One question (I'll also ask Eva when I write her): on pg. 10 she refers to Kythians co-existing with Wookiees here for 50 generations, and then leaving completely. Were the Kythians the original people evolved here, or the Wookiees? Or neither? ((Got an answer, Eva?)) By the way, she's got a great possibility here if she really wants to go into stories about non-humans!

Denise Sheets' "Tidings of Comfort and Joy" is lovely! I didn't see "More A.G." so I know Bob Falfa only as a vague supporting character in A.G., but simply on its own the story is fine, and the character is well handled as a character. Stevie is delightful, too, very true to life -- does she know a child about that age? On the whole, it's one of the best fan stories I've read. If Denise hasn't tried going pro she's crazy.

Her "Day of Atonement" is fine, too. It fits Tommy as shown in the novel (haven't seen the film). I especially liked the line about Avram needing forgiveness like a baby needs it.

Couldn't get into Sherry Magee's "Home for Christmas" but I thoroughly enjoyed "Monologue of a Reluctant Angel". Again, Tommy all the way through.

"Life Day Carol" leaves me cold, but I always enjoy Gordon Carleton's cartoons.

Sheila Paulson's "The Way Home" deserves the SSR warning, all right, but it's still a good story. Except for too many cliches and Leia's stupidity in letting Han take over flying (if she's competant, why not let her do it herself, dammit!) and it works well. Characterization is good (yes, I can believe Chewie's reactions!) and especially after "Festival in Paradise" the portrayal of Leia, aside from the one slight lapse, is welcome.

"Kentoons" -- since I don't know the character, I'll probably miss most of these, but I do like this one. Take that, you stupid cricket! About time someone shot down that obnoxious bug!

On to the one loser in an otherwise fine issue. J.A. Berger's "Festival in Paradise" is loaded with cliches (dusky maidens, indeed!), a lot of which are downright 19th century and grossly overwritten (if a lot of that stuff was supposed to be erotic, I have bad news -- it wasn't). And the author apparently never saw the astronauts' photos of Earth from space, otherwise she wouldn't have described a 4/5 water planet as 'emerald'. Or is the water green? If so, this should have been stated. Aside from that, in two places I specifically noted, language is misused to the point of abuse. On pg. 32, "Vivid pictures came unheralded in his subconcious." Some subconscious he's got! And later there's a sentence that screams for the editor to do something (put it out of its misery most likely): "Solo's glance took in the silence of the compound, their voices unnervingly loud in the early hours before dawn." His glance took in silence?! Come now! Really, Jane and Kelly, don't you do any editing of texts? Almost forgot to mention Re-Dav's blaster that 'spit its beam of death'. I really gagged on that one -- didn't you? This thing reads like something out of a high school creative writing course taken after several months' total immersion in bad 19th and early 20th century literature. And not an original idea or phrase in the whole damn story. As for Leia -- ok, let me wipe the foam off my mouth, do some meditation excercises and try to be calm and rational. Leia is a senator, a diplomat, a princess and a very intelligent young woman. Granted, SW left her and Han with a more or less armed truce, but she's certainly intelligent and diplomatic enough to avoid the hysterical, idiotic behavior shown here. As only one example, whatever she may think of Han, she ought to know that he isn't going to insist on a fast, secret escape for no good reason. What's Berger's problem with Leia? In "Imperial Entanglements" the princess is publicly humiliated and later blackmailed by Han with no chance to fight back, and she winds up a total loser again here. In fact, bad as the portrayal in IE was, this one is downright vicious. Definitely, this story is a downer. Oh, well it's traditional to have at least one turkey for the holidays.

Art: That "Hansicle" cartoon is really sick! Paulie's illo on p. 22 is terrible, looks rushed. On the other hand Bob leaning over to talk to Stevie on p. 25 is fine (good posture, esp. Bob) and Stevie is a doll. Generally, tho, I prefer the style she uses for the Kenny Boyd story, even if the one on p. 50 is the only one in either story that really looks like HF. Joni Wagner's illo for "Christmas 1944" is very nice and so's her Han on p. 68, but Leia is the one that looks about 40. Her 'photo' on p. 64 is so-so, rather sketchy-looking.

To sum it up, with one glaring exception, #5 is an excellent issue. I'm looking forward to #6, etc.

Carol Mularski, 914 Bernd St., Pittsburg, PA. 15210

This LoC is written by a confirmed Luke fan, so you know it is totally impartial and unbiased. Not only that, but I'm not prejudiced in favor of HF, either.

You've got one fine fanzine, Kelly and Jane! Really. Stories, poetry, artwork, graphics -- all right up there with the best of SW (or whatever) fanzines.

Lessee, what do I want to get specific about? Eva Albertsson's story was good, although I was a little disappointed that she didn't follow through on Malla's resentment of Chewie's penchant for running around the galaxy with his pet human, leaving her to raise their son alone. I wouldn't like it much if I were in her position ... would be considering divorce, or whatever Wookiees do. The story did have some good points to make about the fact that "Stormtroopers are people, too". Larry Blake's artwork isn't true-to-life .. but I like it all the more for that, I think. It's interesting.

"Tidings of Comfort and Joy" -- thanks for the editorial warning. It was well done technically, but you're right, it was sappy. "Lonely During the Holidays" stories tend to be that way as a rule.

I liked Denise Sheets' poem based on FK, but could have gone for a long Hannukah or Yom Kippur story, since I have a great fondness for "Frisco Kid". ((So could we, but no one sent us one. Anyone willing to take up the challenge?)) Oh, well, maybe next year.

"Festival in Paradise" ... hmm. I've got a quibble. I enjoyed the premise -- it was interesting to say the least. J.A. Berger handled Han's characterization very well, and Luke's too, (joy of joys!). But for someone who does a good job with the male SW folks, J.A. sure messed up on Leia, in my humble opinion. I can see her getting unwittingly joy-juiced -- after one drink, she'd probably be glad she made the mistake. But generally I thought she seemed both stupid and too much the termagent. After she'd come to her senses and realized that both Luke and Han were alarmed about the developing situation I'm sure she'd cooperate first and ask questions later, rather than be stubborn to the point of a sock in the jaw. However, the fact that she turned the tables on the 'dying' Han at the conclusion helps to make up for my dissatisfaction. Sorry for ranting -- it's just that I like the Princess and wish folks would make her a little more three-dimensional.

"The Way Home" made me feel much better about Leia, and I liked Han's attack of conscience and obvious caring for Chewie, too.

Having had the dubious pleasure of viewing HEROES on TV last week (I didn't like it -- HF was good but Winkler should stick to Happy Days and the Sally Field character was totally unbelievable to me), I was in a position to enjoy "Home for Christmas". Thought Sandy was a terrific character. Everybody should have a cousin like her, especially shell-shocked veteran types.

Don't let go of Paulie, she's fantastic. ((We don't intend to!))

And another FK poem. Yeah! I enjoyed Sherry's article in #4, and have no reason to change my opinion of her as a fine writer in #5.

You people are going to drag me, kicking and screaming, into the Ever-growing Throng of Ford-fanatics if you keep this up. I'm sending a SASE for #6 (and continued persuasion.)

Sandy Crumet, 112 W. Mendenhall, Garden City, KS. 67846

I enjoyed #5 very much. FACETS has evolved into a really top-notch zine. You gals have done a fantastic job. The format is excellent and the print is just the right size. The holiday issue is a clever idea. Well done!

Also, you have done a commendable job of getting the zine out on time. I have a whole list of other zines that I ordered over a year ago and still nothing. Needless to say that is very frustrating for the zine buyer. ((Not to mention the poor schmucks who are waiting for their stories to see daylight!)) I wish all zine editors were as conscientious as you. Please keep up the good work! ((We try -- that's one of our pet peeves, too)).

The artwork in #5 is excellent -- some of the best I've ever seen in a zine. Pp. 36, 41, 48, 50 and 68 are my personal favorites -- those pages are worth the price of the zine all by themselves. (No, sorry, it's too late to raise the price!)

"A Day in the Life of Han Solo" is a very clever Halloween (?) story. The only part I didn't follow very well was how Han and the Wookiees got separated in the cave in the first place; a little more detail, perhaps, would have made the sequence of events clearer. Also, I wish the cleaning machines had been made a bit more sinister. On the whole, a splendid effort.

"A Festival in Paradise" is my favorite. After SW I didn't really care who ended up with the Princess; but after seeing TESB, I became thoroughly with the relationship between Han and Leia. Now I can't seem to find enough Han/Leia type stories. J.A. Berger has done a commendable job of capturing the humor and romance in the verbal conflicts between two strong-willed, stubborn people, who would not admit their affection for each other if a Wookiee sat on them. Great job! Fantastic illustrations! There were a couple things in the story which seemed a little illogical. First, Leia is a highly experienced leader and diplomat. It seems odd that she should really be so gullible. Secondly, why would such a primitive world be any use to the rebellion? It wouldn't make a good base, as closely guarded as it is. If it declared itself a rebel world, it couldn't even defend itself, and the infant rebellion can hardly afford to furnish protection to every world. Since the whole plot does hinge on these two assumptions, however, the reader can forgive a couple of inconsistencies for the sake of the charming story. I'll probably have to read the story fifty more times before I get tired of it. Great job!

I'm not much of a Ken Boyd fan, but p. 50 could change my mind ....

"Tidings of Comfort and Joy" and "Home for Christmas" are both tender, tear-jerking stories. Very sweet!

"The Way Home" is another favorite of mine. I would have enjoyed it more if the conflict between Han and Chewie had been more acute. Much of the effectiveness of Han sacrifice was lost by the knowledge that someone would be coming along in a couple of days to bail them out. This would have been better if left as a surprise ending. Then there would have been far more impact when Leia showed up to the rescue. It was a very good story, anyway.

Susan Prather, 39 Morningside Dr., San Francisco, Cal. 94132

Many thanks for issues #4 and #5 of FACETS -- what a nice couple of publications to spend my spring vacation with. Really, it's truly incredible how the zine has grown since its inception, both in size and overall quality. I think I enjoyed #4 more than #5 -- true that the holidays are a time of sentiment and sloppiness, but, like they say, too much saccharine kills test rats. Even so, 70 pages of mushy Harrisonalia beats none at all. I liked "Home for Christmas" very much, possibly because its ending was so wide open -- am glad Sherry Magee had the sense not to stick on an "and they all lived happily ever after" ending, since that would have jarred terribly with poor old Kenny. One really wonders how he's going to turn out eventually. And of course, which is worse -- being isolated for the rest of his life or getting blown away as Peggy Barilla suggested in her "Tragedy at the Racetrack"? *Sigh* A very thoughtful piece of work, complimented well in a dark sort of way by the following cartoon with Ken taking potshots at Mr. Cricket. By the way, I like the way 'aesthetic white spaces' are becoming a sort of running joke, though I must admit I never thought of the Falcon doing a Goodyear blimp routine and pulling banners around. Beats skywriting, I suppose. Also enjoyed "Tidings of Comfort and Joy", though I can't reconcile this Bob Falfa with the 'shit-kicker-cowboy-truckdriver type' (as Mr. Ford calls him.) from AMERICAN GRAFFITI. I don't know, maybe if I'd seen the sequel it would've all made sense, but I was under the impression that it only dealt with the main characters. ((It did -- HF was in a 'blink and you'll miss him' part near the beginning)) Anyway, Falfa in a responsible position (we hope) like police officer sort of jarred on me. But it was well-written -- nicely understated as opposed to pulling out all the stops and dumping buckets of bathos on you. "Festival in Paradise" was fun to read and that's about all I have to say about it. Martynn's illo on p. 36 was priceless, though, for Solo's expression -- cheeky devil! Also liked the expression on Joni Wagner's Leia on p. 68: a little more Fisher than Princess, but still good -- heck, I wish I could draw like that! Did NOT like "Day in the Life of Han Solo" or "The Way Home": the former seemed very dragged out, with all those killer cleaners puttering around (and was it really necessary to shoot him? I mean sure it got his shirt off, but really!); the latter just left me cold -- I'm not sure why. Inside back cover Han was hysterical, but upsetting for the usual reasons (1983???) And I want to thank ye eds for your comprehensive editorials, which always seem to be chock full of useful info about HF's career. At last I know more or less what's going on in RAIDERS OF THE PURPLE ARK (sorry). Did anyone besides me realize that Mr. Lucas' dog is also named Indiana? ((Yep.)) I hope that's accidental. ((Don't count on it -- GL is known for his 'in jokes', remember?)) Don't know about the battle between the bullwhip and the samurai (did they still have fully armed samurai during the 1930s?) but it's promising nonetheless to be an exciting film.

Overall the zine looks great, though some of spelling mistakes (and I don't mean typos) caused me much distress. ((The spelling errors are mine, Jane's. They're a facet of my personality)) Hate to carp but let's watch the proofreading -- we are literate, after all. (Sorry, it's the English major in me.) But the whole venture is still impressive -- congrats!

Susan Matthews, 717 Belmont E., #202, Seattle, WA. 98102

For Denise Sheets, your story is unforgiveably smarmy, but your poem in perfect. Pink fuzzy slippers? A teddy bear? God replacing the cute little tyke's conveniently just-died friend? Give me a break! ((We warned you, Susan!)) Your only excuse is that it isn't as out of place in a Christmas issue as it might be elsewhere. I can find no fault with characterization or style -- I liked the way you nadled Bob's thoughts about his empty apartment. I've been there myself; I suspect a lot of us have. But the teddy bear and the little bitty boy Stevie seemed a bit excessive to me. Bah, humbug! And as for the poem, "Day of Atonement", I thought it was a gem entirely. I don't know too much about Tommy, don't know all that much about Mr. Ford's roles outside of Han Solo, but I thought you had the cadence of his speech beautifully, and all in all I was completely taken by it. So you're forgiven for "Tidings" -- if that makes any difference to you. 'But listen to my friend. He's a good man. OK?' Loved it, loved it.

Paulie, if you DARE do a story about Dodge and Lincoln Ford, I'll ... I'll ... read it and probably split my sides laughing. How can you think of such a thing? You completely demented creature! Unforgiveable, completely unforgiveable! (I hope you can talk her into it, gals. Will threats help? He, he ...) Actually, it's my conviction that Harrison's twin brother is Steve Martin. We'll find out for sure when and if Mr. Martin unveils his new "Dragged Behind a Car" routine.

Having long time enjoyed the privately circulated manuscripts of Eva Albertsson I was very pleased to have one of her stories in zine format with pictures, even. Very nice pictures, Larry, I especially enjoyed the one on p. 12 -- nice dynamics, I thought. Not being an artist, this is a purely personal opinion. Kind of wish there'd been an illo of Stynn but of course there is one there in armor. Oh, well. Eva's characterization of Han has been one of my favorites for a while now (to be honest, I don't know of too many characterizations of Han that I don't like -- such is the fate of the Hanatic.) I like ALL of Eva's people. The Han/Stynn encounter is another of those standards, but it came off with Eva's usual style and grace; and Eva's little dissertation on swearing -- 'They did, and it was full of saints. Self-styled ones.' -- was especially nice. It's important to me that she pointed out that Stynn was 'merely voicing his beliefs, with no real insult intended'.

Seems to me that the keynote of this issue was alienation, which is perhaps not surprising given some of Mr. Ford's roles. In Sherry's story she makes the important point that the Vietnam vet -- Kenny -- is by no means the man with the market on alienation cornered, and I appreciated that a great deal. This being a Christmas issue, and Christmas being among other things the best time of year to feel alienated and alone, I felt the point well made and well taken -- especially with Ken's 'Hey, you're starting to sound just like me'. I don't know about you, but to my mind that's clear enough indication that Kenny is going to start understanding that though the cause of his separation is his own he's by no means alone in his feelings of strangeness. I guess what I'm trying to get at is: here he is, he's been feeling his apartness, locked into his feelings that no one would understand what happened to him in 'Nam -- and unable or unwilling to talk about it as a result of this conviction. Here comes his lady-cousin, to indicate to him that there are people who will understand his feelings of aloneness, even if the causes are comprehended. No, I don't think I'm making much sense -- here's Kenny saying hey, wait, if she can feel that way, too, it could be we've got something to talk about after all. So that what I got out of Sherry's story was not only the developement of the character in the story itself, but a clear enough indication, to my mind, of how the man was going to change further as a result of the action in the story. And she didn't succumb to the temptation to give us any easy answers. The lady is Kenny's kid cousin, not his future love interest. Grandgram may recognize Kenny, but she's not going to be 'all right again', no matter how much Kenny and cousin both wish they could turn the clock back. 'Sides which it's just a plain nice story. Sigh. Paulie's 'morning glory' illo on p. 51, though nice, was not as appropriate to the story as it might have been -- well, it put me in mind of a lot of things, few of which had to do with family reunions, if you follow me ... Not to find fault with the illo, you understand ....

I know a dude who used to wear his jeans over nothing. One day he got himself caught in the zipper. I kid you not. M'man wears undershorts now.

"Festival in Paradise" was nice action/adventure -- could I call it standard stuff without being misunderstood? It was fun to read, easy to read, with no jarring points in characterization or anyting, and Martynn's illos were as always luscious and lustable. The idea of a princess drugged into such a state is intriguing, though I'm glad it was handled in such a way -- with Han, himself feeling the interesting and unusual effects of the drug, handing the problem over to Luke, who -- not under similar handicap -- will be able to handle it where Han might not be able to restrain himself. There's one point among others that I liked in the story: the fact that Han, not averse to sporting under most circumstances and further affected by the drug, is nonetheless capable of schooling himself. I would have been very angry if the author had put Leia into the position she's in and then NOT gotten her out of it with minimal embarrassment and humiliation. J.A. Berger is not among those whose favorite game is Trash the Princess, and for that I'm grateful.

'Course, a person could do an entire thesis on WHY so many people feel so threatened by/hostile about Princess Leia ... and I wouldn't be surprised if someone does.

Anyway, I think it a point in J.A. Berger's favor, as far as I'm concerned, anyway, that all the protagonists -- especially Han and Leia, who seem to lend themselves more often to misinterpretation than Luke -- are portrayed as reasonably adult and mature people.

"The Way Home (Show me the way to go home ... I'm tired and wanna go to bed ...)" is, again, a nice holiday story. I was particularly interested in Han's reaction to Chewie's apparent decision to wave bye-bye. When we find out that Chewbacca has indeed taken the ship back to Kashyyyk, however, I was pretty certain that Sheila didn't mean the separation to be any kind of permanent. Chewbacca getting fed up with Sheila's Han I can understand. But if he did part company with his Corellian, I don't think he'd take the ship with him. Matter of fact, it might be sort of reassuring to Han if Chewie did take it -- it means that Chewie intends to see Han again, more or less; he could hardly expect Han not to come for his ship.

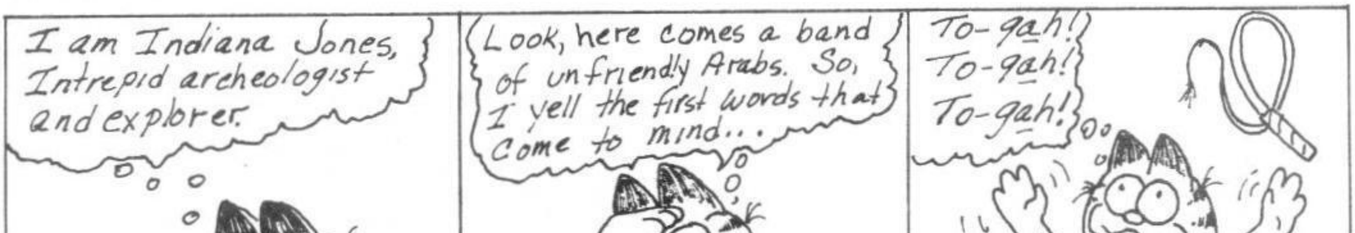
Which brings me to a point about the TV-special based stories, and how and/or whether they fit into 'mainstream' SW. My personal opinion is based on the fact that in the TV special Lumpy got to watch that cartoon of the encounter between Han and Boba Fett. Someone with a better memory than I -- or a copy of the special -- will have to tell me whether or not that incident actually took place on Ord Mandell. I am fairly certain that the bounty hunter in the cartoon was Fett; I remember being told at the time that the bounty hunter was going to turn up in TESB. And so he has. Clear separation of realities -- mainstream SW is fictional/legendary in the TV special - context, source material for holoshows. Whether or not the converse is true depends on whether or not in some future SW movie we actually get a look at any of Chewie's kin -- or better still, a mainstream holoshow about Chewie's fictional family on Kashyyyk.

I think the cover illo of "Three Wise Guys" is really kind of sweet. Kenny on an ass -- 'He was despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief'.

Joni's illo on p. 68 was particularly fine. Martynn's illos are among some of her better ones in J.A. Berger's story, I think; I especially prize, not only Han milking his wound for sympathy on p. 48, but the assortment of thumbnail sketches she's given us in the illo on p. 36 -- Luke looks worried and dubious, the woman looks as if she knows more than she's telling us and is not precisely happy with it, Leia looks thoughtful and a bit hesitant, wait and see sort of face as if she really isn't quite sure how she feels about the trio in front of her; and Han -- well, Han. Ahem. Lust. Pant. Han. What? Oh. Sorry, I sort of -- ah -- lost my place there for a minute.

All in all, it's a fine ish, and even those of us who are almost totally innocent of any of HF's other roles -- like me, for instance -- had plenty in there to read and enjoy. Which I think is a good measure of the quality of the contents, 'cause ordinarily I wouldn't feel especially motivated to read material that wasn't a Hanstory, being more of a Han Solo fan than a Harrison Ford fan.

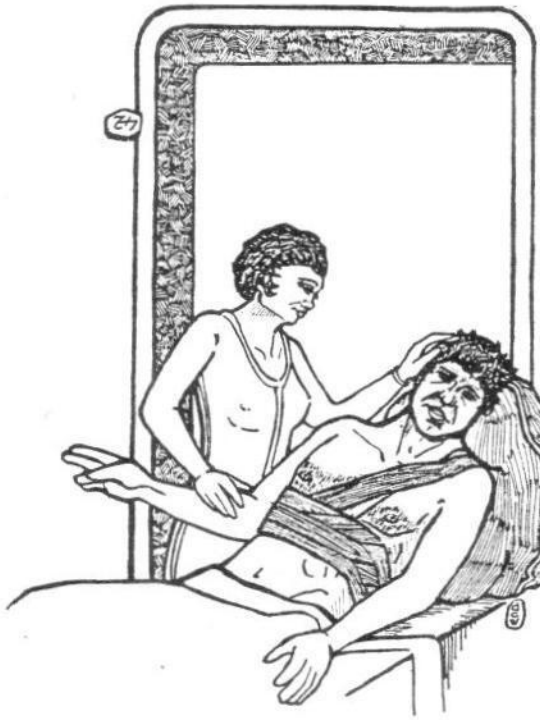
GORTFIELD


I am Indiana Jones, Intrepid archeologist and explorer.
Look, here comes a band of unfriendly Arabs. So, I yell the first words that come to mind...
To-gah! To-gah! To-gah!
©McGaffin 81

HERO

Sheila Paulson

Dammit, it hurts.
Well, I guess I got nobody to blame but me.
What kind of dumb stunt was that to pull?
Three weeks in the lousy hospital,
Three crummy weeks in bed,
And everybody in the damn base droppin' in
Tellin' me I'm some kinda hero.
Hell, it's all a lotta crap.
I ain't no hero.
Maybe I'll get Chewie to stick a 'no visitors' sign on the door.



Han, are you awake?
No. Go away!
Han, if I'm disturbing you ...
Oh, hell, you might as well come in.
You're in already, ain't you, your worshipfulness?
Whaddaya want?
I won't stay long, I know you need your rest.
It's just that I wanted to let you know
How grateful we all are to you
For saving Luke's life.
Aw, I didn't do nothin' special,
Just pushed the kid outta the way is all.
I could imagine what you woulda done to me
If I dragged him back here dead.
Ain't no big deal, Leia.
You said your piece. Now beat it.
Han, can I get you anything?
No.
Are you in pain?
Whadda ya think, sweetheart?
Nah, I feel great, all blasted full of holes.
Don't worry about it, though.
I been hurt worse before. I'll live.
Now go on. I wanna get some sleep.
Goodnight, Han. Sleep well.

* * * *

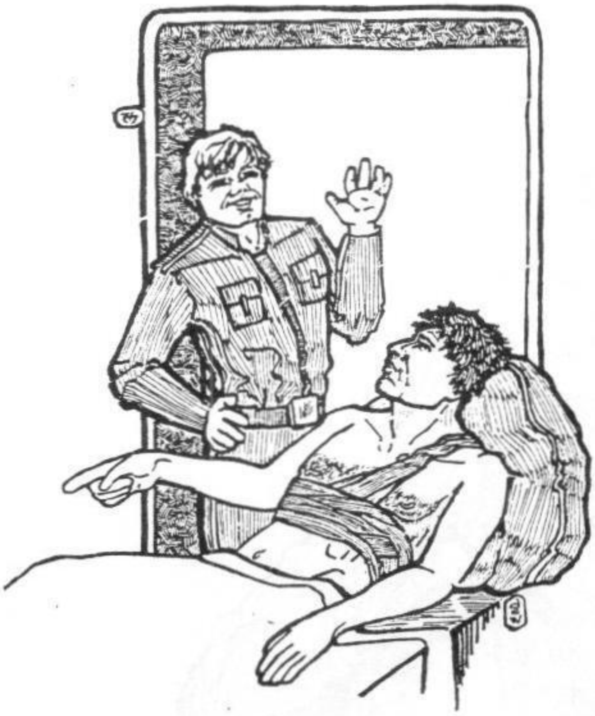
Shit, I don't need anymore visitors.
Pesterin' me, fussin' over me like I was made outta glass or somethin'
What's she tryin' to do, make me feel worse?
I don't want any more of 'em comin' in here.
Dammit, I ain't no hero. Hear that, Leia.
Comin' in here, kissin' me. Shit!
Anybody else tries to come in here
I'm gonna pretend I'm asleep.

* * * *

Just a routine mission, they told me.
In and out real fast, no problems.
Only a dozen stormtroopers
Usin' us for target practice, that's all.
Coulda used Chewie then, but he was back on the ship
Damn kid tried to be a hero.
"I'll cover you, Han. Get back to the ship."
That's a lotta crap. Kid ain't got the experience
In that kinda fight.
"The hell you will, kid! Get down!"
Standin' out there in plain view like that.
Maybe he thinks the Force'll protect him.
Crazy kid's gonna get himself killed.
Gotta do something about that.
So what do I do but the same dumb thing as him,
Jump right up in plain sight too
And push him out of the way.
That ain't bein' no hero. That's bein' stupid.
Last thing I remember is Luke yellin' *"Han, Han!"*
They tell me Chewie showed up then.
What he done to the troopers wasn't too pretty.
Guess he thought I was dead.
But you can't kill a Corellian so easy.
Doctor said Chewie and Luke brought me back here.
First thing I remember, I'm in this lousy hospital bed
With a big hole in my middle.
Doctor says I'll be okay if I stay in bed and follow orders.
Bet he's lovin' every minute of it,
Havin' somebody to boss around
I suppose I deserve it for bein' such a damn fool.
That's what I am all right.
A fool.
I ain't no hero.

* * * *

Han?
What is this, a parade?
Everybody in the damn base comes traipsin' through here.
I'll go away if you don't feel up to visitors.
Nah, kid, you might as well come in.
Everybody else has.
I'm gonna get Chewie to stand guard and keep 'em all out.
They're glad you're well enough to have visitors, that's all.
Besides, everybody's pretty happy with you, Han.

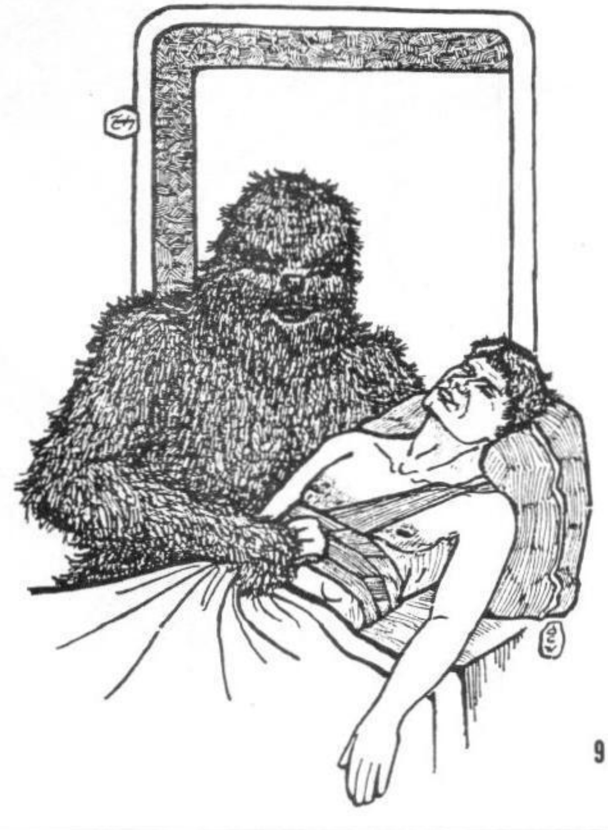


What for, kid?
All I did was get blasted.
Pulled a dumb glory stunt
And made a damn fool outta myself.
Are you mad at me, Han?
What the hell for, Luke?
For getting you hurt.
If it weren't for me, you wouldn't have gotten blasted.
That's dumb, kid. I ain't mad at you.
I'm mad at me.
But it was all my fault.
I guess I was trying to be like you, Han.
That's why I said I'd cover you.
You always handle yourself so well.
I wanted to see how I'd do.
Now I've heard everything, kid.
You oughta know by now
That my main concern is savin' my own skin.
Is it?
Is that why you saved me, Han?
Ah, shit, kid, just forget it, okay?
I didn't do nothin' special.
Musta been just a reflex.
What're you grinnin' at, kid?
You gettin' a big thrill outta seein' me laid low?
You don't like being a hero, do you?
Look, I ain't no hero, Luke.
No, I know you're not.
You saved my life by accident,
Right, Han?

You got it, kid.
Well, that's okay.
Hey, you look tired.
I'll get out of here and let you sleep.
'Bout time somebody did.
Hey, kid?
Yeah, Han?
Come back tomorrow, okay?
You know I will.
Take it easy, Han.

* * * * *

Take it easy? What choice do I got?
Anybody else comes in here, I swear I'll kill 'em.
I can't take much more of this.
Wish my damn gut didn't hurt so much.
But I suppose I deserved it.
That'll teach me.
Anyway, Luke's okay.
That's what matters, ain't it?
The kid's alive, and I'll be outta here in a while.
Guess we showed them stormtroopers, didn't we?
Hey, Chewie, that you out there? Come on in.
Do me a favor, pal, don't let anyone else in here.
I had all I can take for one day.
Keep 'em out for me, pal.
I'm sick of the lot of 'em.
How many times I gotta tell 'em
I ain't no hero.



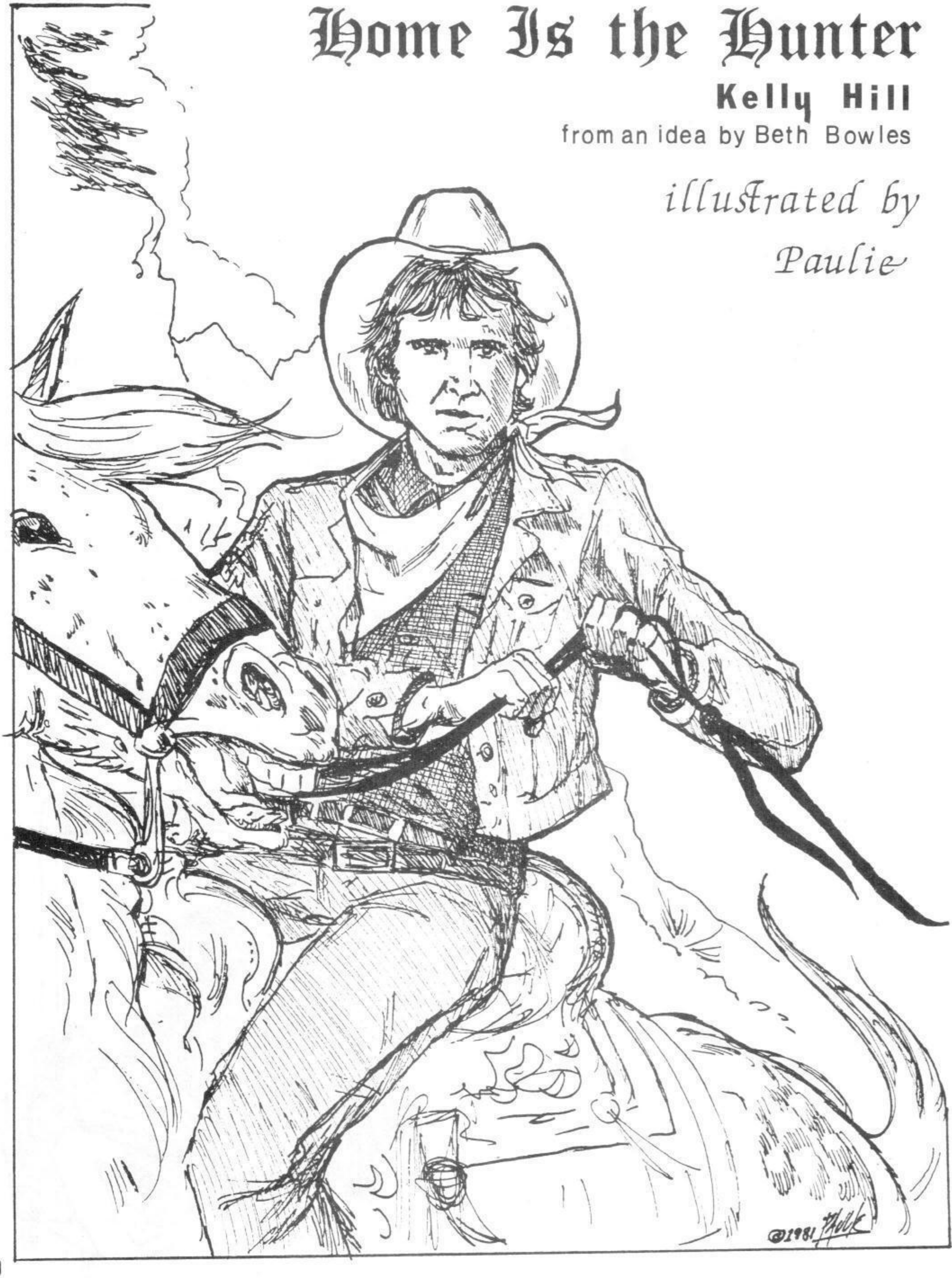
Home Is the Hunter

Kelly Hill

from an idea by Beth Bowles

illustrated by

Paulie



Tommy Lillard almost hated to admit it, but respectability wasn't so bad after all. Just over a year ago, he'd been drifting, rootless and alone. Now, thanks to the efforts of a meshuggene rabbi and an almost forgotten knack for carpentry -- he'd done a good share of the repairs on the family farm in Georgia -- he now had a good job that had prospects of being even better in the future. San Francisco was a rapidly growing town, and local builders were always on the watch for anyone who even knew how to hold a hammer correctly. Avram arranged an interview for Tommy with a contractor in his congregation. Tommy had been nervous, but even his conscience-stricken confession of his somewhat less than exemplary career didn't make a difference to the man. Thinking it over later, he decided that Avram must have been right -- you get spat on all your life the way the Jews had, and you were going to be the last one to do the spitting.

It took some getting used to, this new life of regularity and responsibility, but Tommy was determined to make it work, partly for himself, partly for Avram, and partly for his boss, to prove he'd been right to take a chance on a drifter. He worked hard, giving each job the best he was capable of, and he was beginning to take pride in his work an in an honestly-earned weekly pay envelope. Though he sometimes missed the roving life he had left behind, he now had no real desire to return to it.

Tommy thought all this over while dressing that morning. Yes, it had been a good year, even if Rosalie did keep trying to get him hitched every time he turned around. He knew she meant well, and he just couldn't convince her that he wasn't ready to completely settle down yet. Then, too, there was that mild twinge of guilt he'd been having lately when he ate ham or bacon for breakfast .... But these were minor things; the gain more than made up for them. There was something strangely satisfying about earning a person's trust and a place of respect in the community, he was discovering. If some of his old buddies could see him now, they'd never believe it, he thought ruefully, grinning at his reflection in the mirror. That was all right -- sometimes he didn't quite believe it either.

He finished tucking his shirt into his pants and glance at the clock on the wall. *Better move it,* he thought; *boss expects you to get that wood off on time, you gotta do it.* Mr. Rosen had chosen Tommy to go to Portland and make sure the shipment of lumber he'd contracted for some months earlier got loaded on the boat and sent to San Francisco. He could have picked on of the other men, someone who'd been with him longer, but the job had gone to Tommy. Tommy appreciated the importance of the assignment -- that new lumber meant new buildings and more business for the firm. If it didn't arrive, D. Rosen and Sons would be in deep trouble. So Tommy had determined to get to the camp at least half an hour early to make absolutely sure that all went well. He figured he'd have just enough time for a quick breakfast before he left.

He almost collided with the man when he opened the door to go downstairs. The man, a woebegone looking individual with a drooping moustache, had his hand raised to knock on the door, and lowered it when Tommy asked, "Mornin'; what do you want?"

"You Thomas Lillard?"

"Yeah, that's me. What can I do for ya?"

"Telegram, Mr. Lillard. Sign here, please." Mystified, Tommy signed the book, accepted the thin envelope and opened it. The message was very short and to the point, but it took Tommy some time to make sense of it: *MATT DIGGS BACK IN TOWN. AVRAM SHOT. COME HOME. ROSALIE.*

"Any reply, sir?" the man asked.

It was a moment before Tommy answered. Matt Diggs -- Tommy hadn't given him a thought in the last year, had totally forgotten his threat to get even with the rabbi for killing his brother. Now it appeared he'd done it. Tommy raised stricked eyes to the man and told him, in a voice dangerously close to breaking, "Yeah, there's a reply. Send back: 'On my way; tell Avram hold on.' Sign it 'Tommy'." He handed the man some money to pay for the return telegram, shut the door and read the brief message twice more to make sure it wasn't a bad dream or his imagination. "Goddamn," he whispered, the only sound that could be squeezed out from behind the tight knot in his throat. The few words on the paper wavered and blurred together and he sank blindly into a chair. "Oh goddamn .... "

The minutes ticked by as Tommy sat without moving, his unseeing eyes never leaving the scrap of paper. When he finally came out of his initial shock he was six feet of pure motion. The few belongings he'd brought with him were stuffed into a small satchel and he was checked out of the hotel in less than five minutes. Luck was with him at the railroad depot -- a train was heading toward San Francisco with only two stops between. If there were no delays or breakdowns along the way, he could be home by sundown the next day at the latest. *Two days, cuz, just two more days. Hold on til I get there, please ...*

He reached the station as the clock was striking the hour. The chiming reminded him belatedly of his appointment at the lumber yeard. Tommy felt a pang of regret at letting Mr. Rosen down like this, but he had no choice. All he could do was hope his boss would understand.

There was only a few minutes' wait for the train and soon Tommy was on his way home, the miles clacking by him on the train tracks. There were only a few other people in the car with him, but Tommy tipped his hat over his eyes and pretended to be asleep so he wouldn't be disturbed. His racing mind was far from asleep, though. Why had Diggs waited so long to take his revenge? It had been over a year ... and this was the first time since arriving in Frisco that Tommy had gone out of town, leaving Avram without protection. He'd been watched, they'd both been watched, while Matt Diggs chose his moment to do the job. If Tommy had been in town Matt would never have left it alive, so he had to make sure Tommy was safely gone first. Then the rest was easy enough -- Avram came home from *shul* late many nights, when the streets were quiet and no one would see the incident happen. No one but Avram.

Under the shadow of his hat brim Tommy's eyes opened and he cursed himself silently for letting his guard down and not being suspicious anymore. He should have known Diggs would be back, he should have *known* ... But it wasn't too late. If Avram died -- even if he didn't -- then someday, somehow, Tommy would find Diggs and kill him. An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, so the Bible said.

Unbidden, the image of Avram's face appeared in Tommy's mind. He knew how the rabbi hated violence, no matter the reason, and he already knew how his friend would feel about such thoughts: *There has been enough blood shed. Remember, Tommy, 'vengence is mine saith the Lord'.* It wouldn't matter to him if it was his own death that was avenged -- Avram would trust in his God to see to it that Diggs was punished.

Tommy wasn't that sure. From his experience God had a mighty handy talent for looking the other way now and then. He'd been looking the opposite direction when the rabbi had been shot, hadn't he? *I'm sorry, Avram, but it don't work that way for me,* he thought. *Vengence might be the Lord's, but he's gonna wait his turn on Matt Diggs. That bastard's gonna pay. God can do what he wants with me afterward, but Diggs is mine.* Tommy's hands, buried in his coat pockets, clenched into fists. *He's gonna pay ...*

The train chugged and rattled its way through the afternoon and evening, stopping only briefly at the two small towns along the way. Inspite of the noise of the train and his own jumbled thoughts, Tommy somehow managed to get a little sleep that night, and awakened only when the train came to an abrupt hault the next morning, nearly throwing him out of the seat. Swearing fluently under his breath, he righted himself on the seat and called to the conductor, "Hey, what happened? Why're we stopped?"

"Boiler busted again. Last time it was the engine," the man grumbled loudly enough for everyone to hear. "If it ain't one thing it's another. If this train was a horse I'd shoot it and put it out of its misery."

"How far are we from Frisco?" Tommy asked anxiously.

"Hundred miles or so. You in a hurry, mister?"

"Yeah, as a matter of fact I am."

"Well, whatever appointment you got, you're probably gonna be late getting there. We're likely to be here for the rest of the day. Somebody's been sent up ahead to fetch a couple of wagons to take the boiler and those folks as want to go into town, and then there's the time it'll take to get the blasted thing fixed ..." His voice trailed off as he headed for the next car to tell the passengers there the cheery news.

Tommy did some quick mental calculation. A hundred miles on a good horse would take him two days, providing of course they had a decent animal up ahead. Even if the train were forced to stay the night there, which he figured would be pretty unlikely, the journey would still be completed in less time than that. He shoved down his impatience and waited as calmly as he could for the arrival of the wagons.

He debated briefly whether or not to travel into town, then decided that anything had to be better than looking at the sour face of the conductor for the better part of the day. And after having eaten next to nothing the day before he found he was ravenous. He felt a little guilty about this -- how could he think of food at a time like this -- but practical considerations overrode his conscience. *Don't push yourself, or you ain't gonna be no help to Roslie at all.* There had to be a hash house where he could get a meal, and he'd be in decent shape to make it the rest of the way.

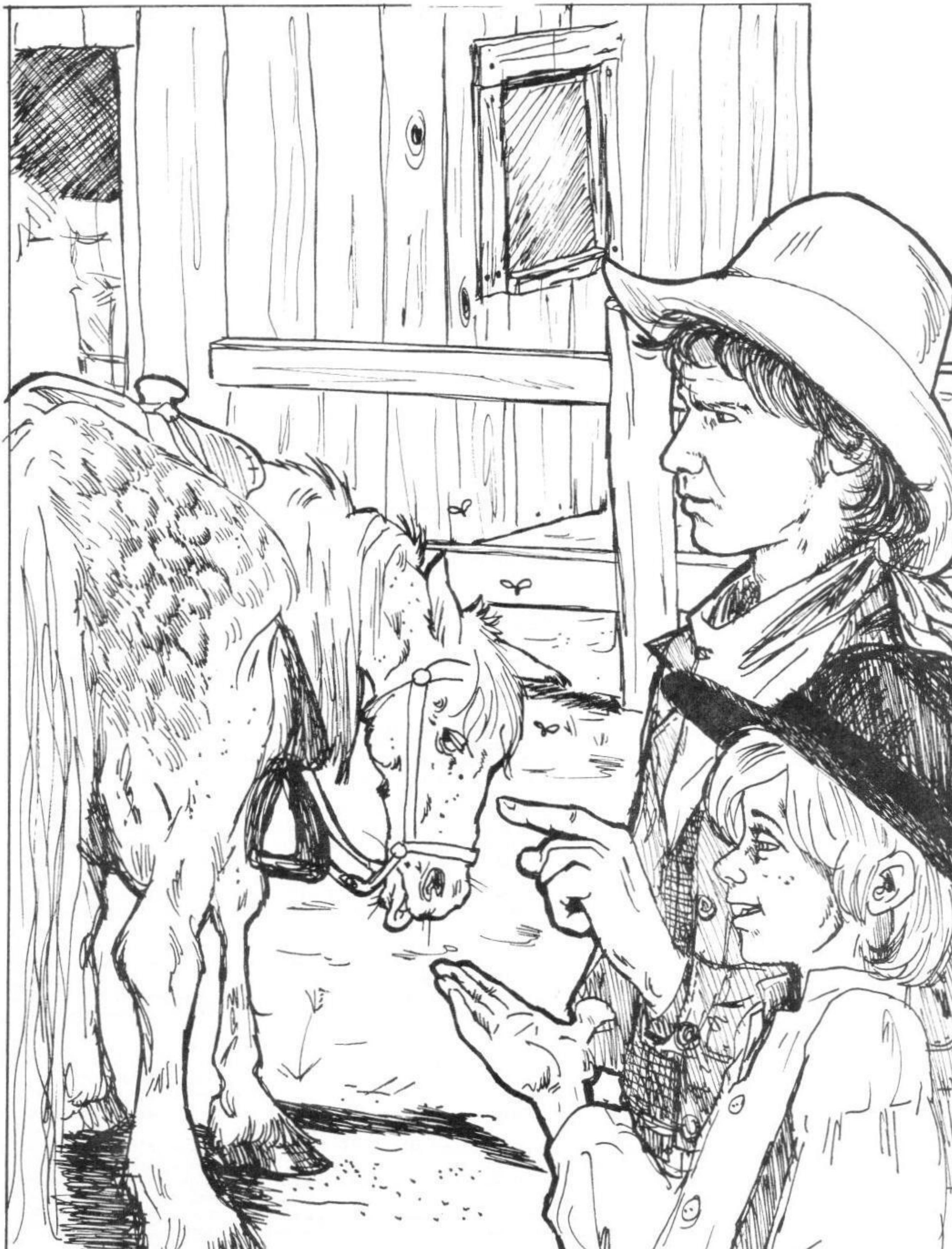
It was perhaps two miles to the town. Little River consisted of a small cluster of houses, shops, a one room schoolhouse, a combination hotel and livery, a saloon, and a half-finished building that looked like a church. It seemed that whenever settlers, especially those from way back east somewhere, came out here, churches, saloons and schools were the first orders of business, and not necessarily in that order. It seemed like a nice enough place, the sort of place he'd have enjoyed putting up in if he'd had the time. But time was rapidly running out for him and for his best friend.

Tommy was called back from his reverie by the voice of the wagon driver. "The train should be ready in a few hours, folks. If it turns out to be worse than they figure, you'll be put up at the hotel at the railroad's expense. Be somewhere around the hotel around noon and we'll let you know how things are going. Hope you enjoy Little River." He punctuated this friendly comment by turning his head to one side and spitting a stream of tobacco juice into the street, creatin a small damp dust puff.

Tommy got down last, stretched to ease the kinks in his muscles -- trains might be fast but they'd sure in hell have to go a long way before they were comfortable -- and looked around to locate the nearest eatery. An unpretentious little place next door to the saloon, with red-checked curtains at the windows, looked inviting, so Tommy started walking toward it. He'd gotten about halfway up the strett when a man came out of the restaurant door. There was something very familiar about the leather cap, dark hair and oversized jacket.

A shiver of recognition went down Tommy's spine. *Diggs!* The man was turning the corner of the building into an alley, and by the time Tommy got there he was gone. Tommy went down the alley, one hand on the butt of his gun, but there was no sign of anything or anyone having been there. Sighing, he turned and left the alley. *Now I know I'm tired; I'm startin' to see things.*

Despite this self-assurance, the cold feeling in his spine remained. He'd learned a long time ago to trust that sensation -- it was always a sure indication of trouble. Once a few years ago it had saved him from a bullet in the back in Kansas. It had never steered him wrong yet, and a niggling in the back of his mind told him he wasn't wrong this time either. That had been Diggs, he was sure of it.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But what was he to do? Logic dictated that he ignore Diggs, get back on the train and finish the trip home. But that same undefined instinct told him that this might be the only chance he'd have to catch the man and make him pay. Even with the realization that Avram could be dea by the time he got back to San Francisco, Tommy knew he'd have to go after Diggs now. The need for revenge was only partly responsible for his decision. He was too keyed up now to sit still and do nothing. Tommy clamped the lid down on his jangling conscience and started making plans.

Luggage would be no problem -- the few supplies he'd need would be available at the local general store, and since Mr. Rosen had been generous with traveling money he had enough cash. He'd traveled many times with no more clothes than the ones on his back, so he didn't see any need to go back to the train for his valise. The big problem was a horse. Tommy headed for the livery.

When the stable hand, a laconic blond youth with vacant blue eyes, informed him that a man answering Diggs' description had left a scant ten minutes before, Tommy swore under his breath and asked. "Which way did he head?"

"Outta town," the hand muttered slowly, settling a little more comfortably on his hay bale.

"What road?" Tommy's temper was running short and he didn't want to spend precious minutes dragging the information out of the youth.

"'Tain't but one road outta town, mister." He gestured lazily toward the main street.

"I know that, but which way?" Tommy did his level best to keep his voice calm and even, but he could feel his blood pressure going up.

"Out thataway." The youth pointed east. "'Tain't but one road outta town, mister," he repeated, looking at Tommy accusingly as if to say what an idiot the older man was for not knowing that. Tommy had to fight down a compulsion to strangle the boy.

"Thank you very much," he said with exaggerated courtesy. "Now, before you fall asleep on that hay bale, would you tell me if you have a horse for rent? If it ain't gonna tax your brain too much to think on it a minute, that is."

It took a couple minutes of deep concentration for the boy to come up with an answer. "Yeah, I guess so," he finally conceded.

Tommy waited but he didn't continue, just sat staring off into space. "Well?" he finally asked, his voice on the edge of cracking with frustration. *Why me, God? And why now?*

The hand gave him a sour look and hauled himself off the bale. "Well, all right, if'n you're in such a damn hurry," he drawled peevishly. He loped down the line of stalls and stopped at the last one. "Here 'tis. Name's Junior." He leaned against the opposite wall and stared off into space again.

Tommy couldn't believe his eyes. Junior was a big gray gelding, and only someone with a fine sense of humor or a kind heart could refer to him as a horse. To Tommy, he looked more like a nightmare. He was rafter-hipped, Roman-nosed, lop-eared, herring-gutted, and someone had put his neck on upside down. Tommy stared at him a moment then turned to the stable hand. "All right, kid the joke's over. Now where do you keep the *real* horses?"

"Ain't you heard, mister? They's still a gold rush on. 'Tother horses been took. He's it." Apparently exhausted by this extended bit of conversation, the boy slid to a sitting position against the wall. Tommy wondered how many splinters he'd managed to collect in the back of his shirt on the way down. Finally the youth managed to summon up the energy to ask, "Well, mister, ya want him 'r not? Ain't got all day, y'know."

Tommy sighed. Trying to catch up with Diggs on this misbegotten beast was a fool's dream ... He looked the horse over again, repressed a shudder and said to the boy, "I don't have much of a choice. Who do I talk to about him?"

It took five minutes to drag the relatively simple information out of the boy, and Tommy could feel himself turning purple with unvented frustration. Finally he left the livery and headed for the saloon. He found the livery owner finishing the last of his breakfast. Tommy walked over, introduced himself and after a moment or two they settled on a mutually agreeable fee. Tommy didn't even give him much of an argument -- it seemed so good talking to someone with an apparently full deck.

Back at the livery after a quick stop at the general store for ammunition, Tommy found Junior saddled and ready, but the boy was nowhere to be seen. Just as well, Tommy thought; he didn't really want to see the kid again anyway. Probably he was passed out somewhere from the exertion of putting the saddle on Juinor's back. He secured his supplies on the animal's back, wishing his sorrel were here instead, got into the saddle and headed Junior out.

Once on Junior's back he discovered he hadn't made such a bad deal after all. The big gelding didn't look like much, but what he lacked in conformation he made up in temperament and riding ease. Tommy could close his eyes and imagine he was in a rocking chair, Junior's gait was so smooth. He also had the stamina of a horse five years younger than his age of twelve. Tommy found this out the first day by pushing both Junior and himself to their respective limits, and they covered nearly fifty miles. Tommy apologized to his mount by find some good grass to hobble him in after sundown, and didn't saddle him up again till full daylight the next morning.

After two days on the trail Tommy was thrown a challenge -- all trace of Matt Diggs disappeared. Tommy put all his tracking skills to work, hoping against hope they were still as good as they used to be in his trapping days. The next day he found the day old remains of a campfire in open rocky country , but there was no telling if it had been Diggs'. Tommy continued on, and his persistance was rewarded when he found some fresh hoof marks and found a crack imprinted in the outline. Diggs' horse had a slight split in his off hind shoe. The crack appeared deeper than when he's last seen it. Breathing a half-conscious prayer Tommy patted Junior's misshapen neck. "Diggs is a fool for not havin' that seen to. His horse is gonna lose that shoe, Junior. Let's hope it happens soon." Junior whinnied in agreement.

The prayer was answered the next day when Tommy spotted the cracked shoe, now almost totally split, off to one side of the trail. A wolfish grin spread over his features. "We got him now, Junior, we got him!" He slapped the big gray into a gallop.

Tommy knew the high country well -- many were the times he'd hidden from the law there. He knew of paths through the rocks that would provide him with vantage point from which to see the trail without being seen. The climbing was hard on both man and horse, and Tommy had to stop and dismount several times to pull stones from Junior's feet. All the trouble was justified in the end when Tommy, squinting against the afternoon sun on the second day, saw the form of a horse and rider soming up the trail toward him. He watched patiently as the forms got closer and nearly let out a whoop of delight. He remembered the bay geld from the day of the beach ambush over a year ago, and the horse's tired, dismounted owner had a face he would never forget. Tommy quieted Junior and the horse, sensing something was about to happen, didn't even offer a snort in protest.

Diggs and his mount slowed down and stopped as they came abreast of the rocks where Tommy was hiding. Tommy cocked his revolver and very carefully took a bead on him. The range was perfect -- Diggs would be dead before he hit the ground. But as his finger tightened on the trigger, it occured to him that this was exactly the way Avram had met his fate. Shooting a man down without being seen was a coward's way, and Tommy, his actions in the Indian camp to the contrary, was no coward. He shifted his aim slightly a squeezed the trigger. The canteen that Matt had just raised to his lips seemed to explode in his hand and he dropped it with a surprised oath. His hand went to his gunbelt but Tommy's voice from the rocks stopped him.

"If you plan on stayin' alive for the next few minutes, I wouldn't do that if I was you," Another bullet, close enough to burn a hole in Diggs' coat made his point. "It doesn't really matter much to me, though , since you're gonna be dead before I leave here anyway."

"What's goin' on here? Who is that?" Diggs' voice cattied a slight edge to it -- disembodied voices made him nervous. "Come on out here and face me man to man!"

"Man?" Tommy laughed without humor. "Hell, I don't see a man. All I see is a yella skunk who guns innocent folks down in the street then lights out like a coward. But I'm gonna come out anyway -- I want you to get a real good look at me before I kill you."

Tommy came out of the rocks with his gun ready and Diggs' eyes went wide with surprise and alarm. "Didn't exactly expect to see me here, did ya, Diggs? Figured you'd be safe and nobody'd come after you. Why don't some folks ever learn?" He shook his head in mock bewilderment.

"I told you before, this ain't your fight!" Defiance and a tinge of fear mingled in his voice. "It was my brother the rabbi killed, and the thing was between him and me; you ain't got no part in it!"

"Wrong; I got a big stake in it. I spent too much time gettin' his ass across country in one piece to let him get shot by a bastard like you. He ain't my brother, but he's my friend, and more of a man than your pig-faced brother ever thought of being. He's back in Frisco maybe dyin' right now, and for that you're gonna die. I don't think you know any prayers, but if you do start sayin' them. You got five minutes."

"You're gonna shoot me down here without even a chance?"

Tommy's voice was hard and grating. "What the hell kind of chance did you give Avram? You knew he didn't carry a gun, that he don't believe in it. And you shot him down in the dark and took off -- yeah, you really gave him a way out, didn't you? You still got three minutes."

In desperation Matt went for his gun. His hand had barely touched the pistol butt before Tommy's bullet nicked his hand and he yelped in pain. "Now that wasn't real bright, was it?" Tommy commented quietly. "Just so's you don't get anymore ideas like that, you better just drop that gunbelt and kick it over here. Careful now." With his good hand Diggs unbuckled his belt and let slide to the ground, kicking it in Tommy's direction. Tommy picked up the gun, tucked it into the waist of his pants and said, "That's better. You about finished makin' your peace? I suspect it'd take a lot longer than five minutes in your case, but I ain't got the time to wait around."

"Look, why don't you just let me go? It's finished now and I'll never come back this way again, you got my word."

"Your word?" Tommy didn't know whether to laugh or curse. "Your word ain't worth the wind it takes to give it, you already proved that. And you're wrong again -- it ain't over. It never will be until I put a bullet between your eyes and leave your carcass here for the buzzards to finish off."

"Then why don't you get it over with?" Diggs shouted hoarsely. "You say you ain't got time to wait around, so why don't ya just pull that trigger and kill me now and stop jawin' about it, you sonofabitch!" Matt came a few steps closer to Tommy. "Come on, I'll make it easy for you. Kill me, you bastard!"

Tommy pulled back the hammer of his pistol and took careful aim. Then a strange thing happened. He wasn't seeing Matt anymore, he was seeing Avram. The scene in his mind's eye was of the night of their arrival in San Francisco. He could see Matt's face, distorted with grief, rage and hatred, challenging Avram to draw on him. And he could see Avram's eyes full of pleading and something akin to pity. "Please, don't do this," he had said, and it seemed to Tommy that the words were directed at him. "No more killing." the image wavered and disappeared from his mind, and he found himself looking at Diggs again. The man hadn't moved a muscle, so Tommy assumed his 'vision' had only taken a second or two.

He sat down on a nearby rock, keeping his gun trained on Diggs. "Y'know, you're absolutely right. You're makin' it easy for me -- too easy. Somehow just shootin' you down ain't quite right. So what should I do with you? Suppose I could haul you back to Frisco for trial, but I don't really trust lawmen and judges to do the right thing by you. Most of 'em ain't got the brains of a flea for all their book learnin'. Lessee, what else? I could shoot both your kneecaps off and leave ya here. Naw, too messy, and I don't like hearin' a grown man scream. Or I could rub you with honey and stake you out over an anthill, like the Injuns do. Wrong -- no honey and no anthill out here." A cold smile flitted across Tommy's face as he latched onto an idea he liked. "Now wait just a minute, I got me a good plan now. Start unsaddlin' that horse of yours. Do it quick -- I might just decide to shoot off your kneecaps anyway if you try takin' your time."

Matt did as he was told, dropped the saddle onto the dusty ground and turned back to Tommy slightly mystified. "All right, that's done. Now what?"

"This." Tommy rose from the rock, slapped the bay's rump with his hat and split the air with a pistol shot and a throat-stripping war whoop. The horse shied and bolted across the wasteland, making good time despite the lost shoe. Tommy watched until the animal was a speck in the distance, then motioned to Diggs with the muzzle of his gun. "Now it's your turn. Start following that horse. There's a town a few miles up ahead. If you hurry you might just make it before sundown."

"That's it? You're letting me go?" Suspicion overrode relief in his voice.

"Only for a while. I'm not gonna kill you today after all, but some day you're gonna wish I had. There's a bullet in this gun with your name on it, and one day it'll find you. Only you won't know where and you won't know when, anymore than Avram knew when you got him. From now on, you keep a watch over your shoulder, 'cause someday I'll be there. And mine is the last face you're gonna see this side of the gates of hell. And Diggs? Don't think you can get lucky three times in a row. You ever show your weasel face within fifty miles of Frisco I won't do you the favor of letting you know I'm there."

Diggs looked at Tommy's set face, at the eyes hard as diamonds, and knew he meant what he said. He turned and started walking slowly in the direction that he'd seen the horse go. Tommy watched him for a few minutes then went back up into the rocks to get his horse. Leading him down to flatter ground he got on the big gray's back and said wearily, "Come on, Junior, let's go home."

It had only been a week since he'd last stood in front of the rabbi's door. As Tommy mounted the porch steps he thought about the immense changes that had been made in that short a time. It just wouldn't be the same around here anymore without his friend. For the first time Tommy had real reason to curse that friendship -- if he had not opened a part of his heart to the rabbi, he wouldn't hurt the way he did now. He took a deep breath and knocked on the door.

He wasn't prepared for the Rosalie that greeted him. Nowhere was widow's black to be seen, and her smile was as bright as the spring sunshine around him. "Tommy, Tommy, I'm so glad you're back!" she cried joyously, flinging herself into his astonished arms. Tommy's feelings must have shown in his face because Rosalie's smile went even wider. "Come in, quickly. I have something to show you."

Tommy allowed himself to be brought through the door and into the master bedroom where the 'something' waited. If Tommy had been surprised before, it couldn't hold a candle to what he was experiencing now. Sitting up in bed, flanked with pillows, a shawl over his shoulders and a book in his lap -- was Avram, looking, if not hale and hearty, at least very much alive and on the mend.

This unexpected sight was too much for Tommy's overloaded mind to take in all at once. His first words burst forth inspite of himself. "B-but you're supposed to be dead!"

Avram's eyebrows shot up, but there was a bright twinkle in the blue eyes beneath them. "You'd like it better maybe if I was?" Seeing the dazed look on his friend's face he told Rosalie, "I think you'd better sit him down before he falls down."

Rosalie led an unprotesting Tommy to a chair next to the bed and pulled up another next to it for herself. When his friend was seated Avram continued, "You know, if I'm not supposed to be alive now, it's all your fault."

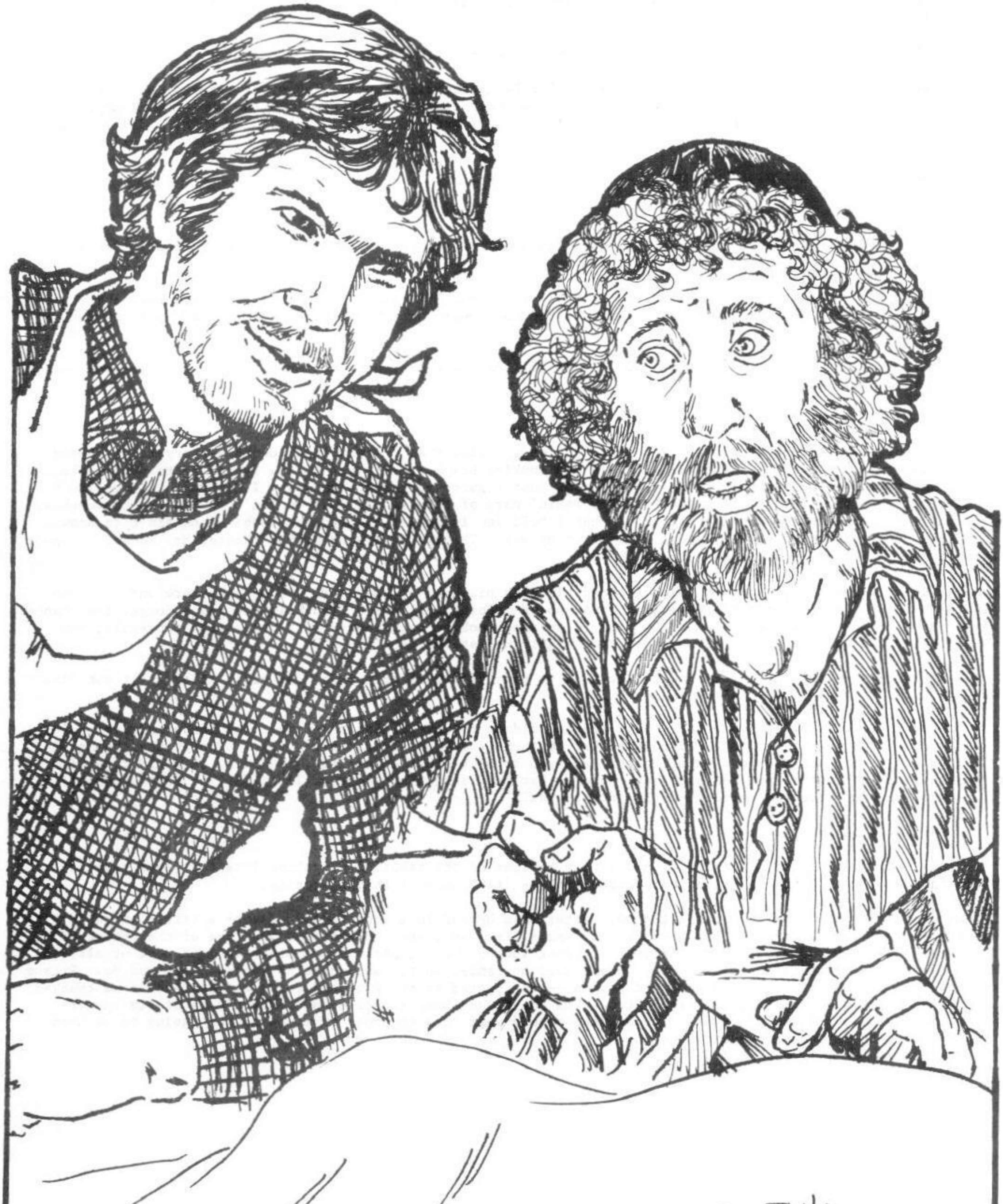
"What? Why ... "

"That telegram you sent told me to hang on. And I've always taken your advice before on things I didn't know about -- well, most of the time, anyway. So I took it think time too. It wasn't easy at first, but it got better after a while, so here I am."

"You're gonna make me real old real fast with stuff like this," Tommy said slightly accusingly. Then his expression softened and he gripped his friend's hand in one of his own. "But goddammit, cuz, I'm glad to see ya again!"

"And I you, my friend." Avram didn't even reprove Tommy for the expletive, Roslie noticed. Well, this was something of a special occasion after all. "So, if I may ask, why did it take you so long to get home?"

That was the one question that Tommy didn't want to answer. It took him a moment to frame a reply that was a least partly the truth. "Well, I still had a couple loose ends to tie up, and the train broke down on the way. Those



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contraptions'll have to go a long way before they can beat a good horse, I'll tell ya." He then regaled Avram and Rosalie with the tale of his acquaintance with Junior.

He was a good storyteller, and by the time he was finished both his listeners had tears in their eyes from laughing so hard. "I hate to break this up," Rosalie said when she finally caught her breath, "but Avram's got to rest now. The doctor said he wasn't to overdo for a while, and I've had a hard time just making sure he's stayed in bed. And no arguments out of you, either," she admonished her husband, rising and tucking the quilt more firmly around him.

"Yes, dear," the rabbi replied meekly, with a sly wink in Tommy's direction.

"You do like she says, cuz, and I'll see you again a little later, all right?" Tommy was ushered out of the room by Rosalie, who closed the bedroom door behind her and motioned him to follow her into the parlor. "Tommy, I have to ask you something, but you don't have to answer if you don't want to. What I want to know is -- did you get him?"

Tommy, stunned, asked quietly, "You knew? But how?"

"Intuition. And I know you. Did you get him?"

Tommy considered keeping silence but Rosalie's eyes could not be ignored. Finally he answered slowly, "Avram's safe, Rosalie. Diggs won't be back this way again."

She smiled grimly. "A rebbetzen probably shouldn't say this, but I'm glad. I can't forgive or forget quite as easily as Avram. Thank you. Now, you're probably tired and hungry after that train ride. Why don't you take a nap while I fix lunch?"

"I can't just yet, but I will when I come back. I've still got one more person to see today. I'll be back before noon, so save a place for me, all right?"

" ... So y'see, sir, I didn't mean to be runnin' out on you like that," Tommy concluded his story to Mr. Rosen. He was standing in the middle of the small office and looking his boss straight in the eye as he told his tale. "And I ain't tryin' to excuse what I done, either. I just figured you oughta know why I messed up. I couldn't let that sonofa -- that guy go off without ... my takin' care of things. It just wouldn't've been right somehow." He sighed. "Now, you understand not a word of what I told you is to get back to the rabbi -- he ain't to know any of this. Now that I've said my piece I'll be on my way. Thanks for giving me the chance, Mr. Rosen. I won't forget it soon." He started for the door.

"Wait a minute, Tommy." Mr. Rosen's voice stopped him with his hand on the door. "Come back here and sit down a minute." Tommy, after a moment's hesitation, did so, and Rosen continued, "You said you won't forget the chance I gave you. I think you already have." To Tommy's puzzled look he explained, "If I understand correctly, you are walking out on your job here. I consider that highly ungrateful, don't you?"

It took a minute for Tommy to understand. "You mean -- you still want me workin' for you? After I lit out like that?"

Rosen smiled. "Yes, I do. For one thing your leaving didn't do any permanent damage. The lumber arrived safely on schedule. The schmendricks in Portland just had to think for themselves, that's all. For another thing, I won't have you taking all the good experience I gave you to some other competitor. Besides, it would take time I don't have to train another man to take your place." For the first time Tommy smiled. "So, no more arguments. I'll expect you here tomorrow morning on the job as usual."

"If you say so, yessir."

"I say so. And Tommy? Confidentially, I'm a little envious of the rabbi. If anything like that ever happened to me, God forbid, I hope I have a friend who would -- ah -- 'take care of things' for me."

As Tommy walked out of the office he felt good, better than he had in a long time. It took a little while to figure out just what was different, then he knew: it was a free day today. His friend was free of the threat of Matt Diggs' vengeance, he was free of the fear of being looked down on for what he had been, and most of all, for the first time in years he felt free to choose what he wanted to be, and where he wanted to go and do. Frisco was a good place, and his job was a good occupation -- he figured to stick around for a while. And if he changed his mind later -- well, that was all right, too. The ghosts had been exorcised and couldn't haunt him anymore. Tommy smiled as he continued his walk. It had been a good year, and the ones from now on were going to be even better -- now that he was home again.

SIXTEEN RUNS

Karen Trimble

(tune: "Sixteen Tons")

Some people say a man is made out of mud,
But I say a man is made of muscle and blood.
Muscle and blood, skin and some bone,
Deceitful mind and a back that's strong.

Chorus: You make sixteen runs and what do you get?
Another day older and deeper in debt.
Old Obi-wan, don't call me 'cause it ain't fun --
I need my ship for the Kessel run.

I was born one morning, the sun didn't shine.
I walked to my ship and it felt so fine.
Smuggled one ton of spice, another of gold,
The Empire said, "Well, bless my soul!"

Repeat Chorus

If you see me comin' better step aside --
Old Greedo didn't and old Greedo died.
Two fists of iron and and gun that'll kill,
If my fists don't get you my blaster will.

Repeat Chorus

Occupational Hazard

Eva M. E. Oslo

illustrated by Pam Kowalski

"Hey, Chewie, how're you doin' down there?"

A growl from below deck told him that storing of the contraband spice was nearly completed.

"Fine. I'm finished up here. Soon as you're ready we can get out of here." He pulled off his work gloves and headed for the bridge to finish the instrument check.

About twenty minutes later the *Millennium Falcon* lifted off from Kessel, en route to Tatooine via Hixo.

After a few hours in hyperspace they came out near Hixo, far enough away for Han to check on the extent of the Imperial presence. The damn cruisers had been getting thick in this sector recently, and the last thing he needed was attention from any of them. Naturally he was somewhat annoyed to discover that not only did his illegally long-range sensors pick up several cruisers, but one of them was apparently headed in his direction.

Chewbacca noticed this also and grumbled a Wookiee expression of extreme displeasure.

"Yeah, this could get a little tight." Han quickly assessed the instrument panel. "They're coming for us, all right. Start getting that stuff up, Chewie."

The Wookiee growled enquiringly.

"Use the port emergency airlock -- that'll put it out of range and toward the sun."

While his first mate shambled off toward the smuggling hold in question, Han kept an eye on the approaching cruiser and swore quietly. Jabba wasn't gonna like this.

Indicators told him that Chewbacca had started removing the half dozen small crates from their hiding place. The spice would be emptied, a crate at a time, into the airlock and flushed into space. The crates would then be broken up and fed to the specially designed disposal unit. The Wookiee worked fast when he had to, and was cycling the last of the spice by the time the cruiser came within range of normal sensors and radio.

"Corellian freighter type BX5, identify yourself. Repeat, Corellian freighter type BX5, identify yourself. Over."

Grimacing, Han flipped on the radio. "Freighter *Black Sun*, registry 7CM33. What's the problem? Over." He kept his tone friendly and innocent.

"*Black Sun*, you are entering a restricted area. Change course immediately or prepare to be boarded. Repeat, change course immediately or prepare for boarding."

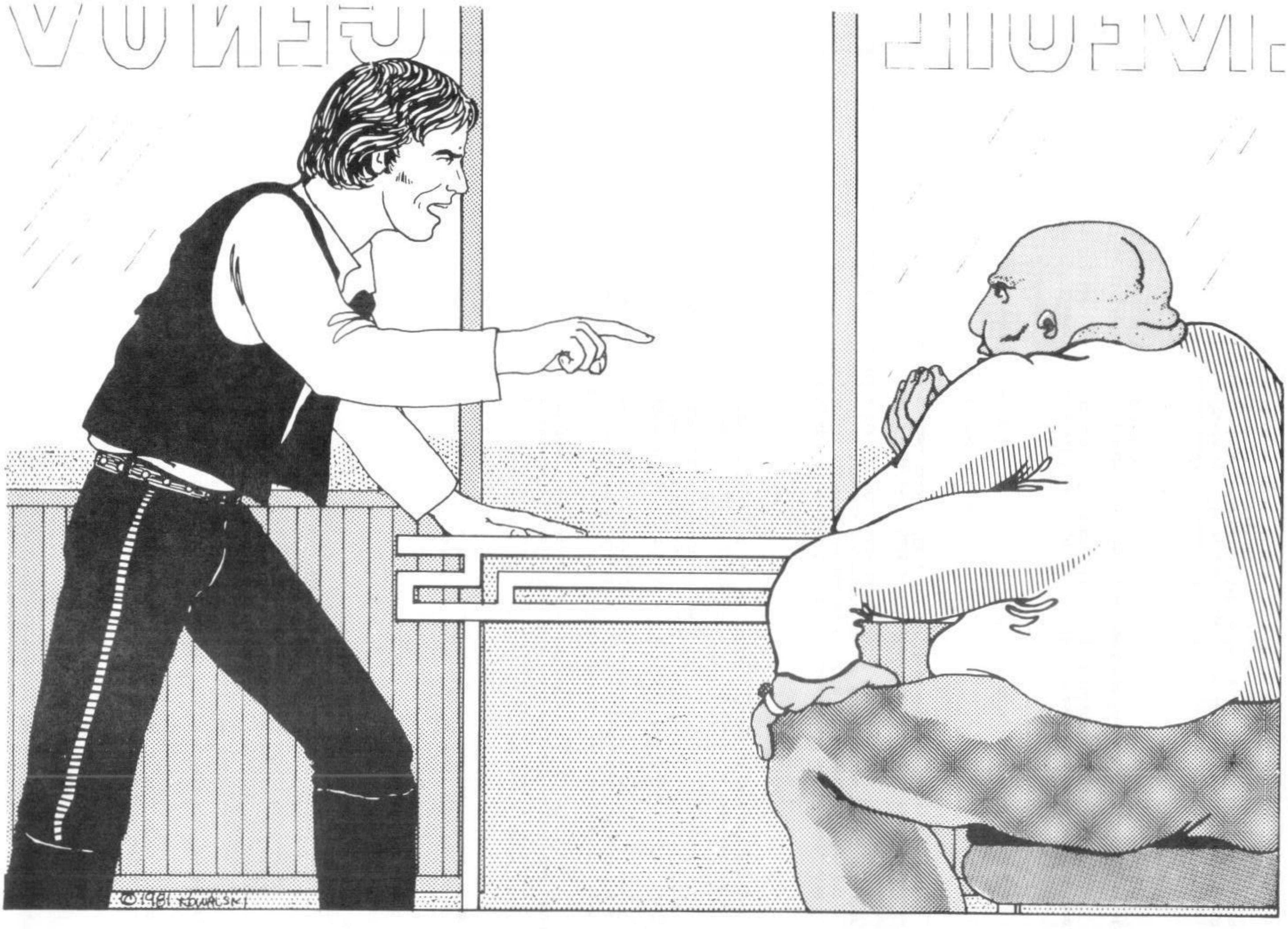
"What the ... " This was something new since he'd been here last -- *really* new if he hadn't heard about it on Kessel. "Sorry, folks, this is news to me. How about letting me know what course I can take for Salvan Port? Over." If they detected just a hint of sarcasm in his voice this time -- well, what did they expect when they pulled stunts like this without warning?

The cruiser sent a course correction, which he acknowledged. And the Imperial ship stayed nearby until it was obvious that the *Millennium Falcon*, alias *Black Sun*, was actually taking that course before going on with its own business.

Han made sure the radio was off before he rather colorfully expressed his feelings. Damnation! He now owed Jabba the Hut one helluva lot of money for that unnecessarily dumped spice.But how could he have known? True, it didn't happen very often, but the *Falcon* did get boraded sometimes and spice, with its distinctive fragrance, was hard to disguise. He'd gotten off once by convincing a particularly unbright inspector that the smell was from the air circulation system. He couldn't count on *that* line working working again, though--the only safe move had been to dump the stuff and put himself deep in debt to Jabba.

He'd worked his way around to calling the Imperial officer the impolite equivalent of the illegitimate offspring of a retarded bantha with as social disease as Chewbacca came back in. The Wookiee, settling into the co-pilot's chair, professed to be shocked.

Han snorted. "You haven't been shocked since you poked into the back of a no-owner-parts-repairable computer when you were a kid!"



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Chewbacca laughed appreciatively.

They had no further difficulty and a few hours later were leaving Hixo with a perfectly legal cargo of machine parts for another customer on Tatooine.

Han tried to occupy himself with losing to his partner at the game table, but he was concentrating so hard on the problem of explaining the situation to Jabba, and emerging in one piece that Chewbacca finally complained winning was no fun when Han didn't even try.

As Mos Eisley Spaceport, Han took his time about unloading the other cargo and finishing the deal with its buyer, but, at last, leaving Chewbacca at the ship, he went to face Jabba the Hut.

This unpleasant individual maintained a hole-in-the-wall office near the port, an office carefully designed to give the authorities the impression he was just another small-time businessman. Han knew better. He'd worked for Jabba on and off for several years (and heard about him for many years before that) and had had several occasions to find out personally just how big an operator the creep really was. The operation included a stable of "collectors", none of them any more socially acceptable than their boss. Han considered himself lucky to be one of Jabba's preferred shipper--besides good jobs, that meant he's get a reasonable chance to pay off before Greedo, or one of the others came after him. *Un*luckily, this wasn't the first time he'd had to dump a cargo intended for Jabba and the Hut made his displeasure perfectly clear.

"That's 12,000 credits, Han. If my shippers keep dumping such expensive cargos with no way of paying for them I won't be able to stay in business."

"Look, how was I supposed to know they were just gonna give me a warning?! Nobody told me about that restricted area crap!" Han was righteously angry. "Damn it, Jabba, you know you'll get your money! Now get the hell of my back and let me go so I can start making it!"

Jabba shook his head. "Dear, dear Han! I realize you come by your temper honestly, but you really should stop and think sometimes before opening your mouth -- you're going to be in real trouble someday if you're not more careful." He leaned back, smiling. It was not an attractive sight. "I'll give you a standard month. That should be enough time for you, certainly, even with the interest, which brings it up to 15,000."

Han swallowed hard. Jabba was right -- his mouth was going to get him killed some day. But sometimes the risk was almost worthwhile. "A standard month -- Jabba, you're one of the biggest crooks I know, and that's saying a lot!" He managed to keep his voice even. "But you'll get your money, don't worry."

"Oh, I don't doubt it. One thing everyone knows about the Solos, they always pay their debts, eventually. But it's the 'eventually' that worries me just now, my boy. I simply can't afford to let it go any longer. I have debts, too, you know. See you in a month, Han." This was an obvious dismissal.

Sitting down on his temper, Han stalked out. One month to collect 15,000 -- on top of operating expenses and a few small debts that had to be cleared up soon. What a pleasure it'd be to let Chewie have Jabba alone for half an hour ....

* * * *

Even for Han Solo and the *Millennium Falcon,* coming up with that much money in a month would not be easy, even counting in the couple days' grace period Jabba usually allowed. He managed a couple of high-paying jobs, but the outlay for bribes and other expenses was high also, bringing his profit down to merely respectable. A number of lesser trips had lower expenses, which helped a bit but not nearly enough.

One of these cargos took him back to Tatooine about a week and a half before the deadline, and he had the misfortune to meet Jabba, strolling with a trio of his nastier aides. "Han, my boy! Have you come to pay off your little debt?"

"Not yet, but don't worry, Jabba. I'll have it for you in time."

"I do hope so, Han. That money means a great deal to me, but the principle is even more important."

"Principle?" Han made it sound like an obscenity.

"Of course -- the principle that my agents must do their jobs properly or suffer the consequences. Remember, Han, I always collect -- one way or another. See you around." He waddled off, closely followed by his thugs.

Han shivered slightly. That 'one way or another' was ominous. Jebba never hesitated to send a 'collector' or offer a reward if he thought someone needed to be used as an example.

* * * *

The month, and a day over, was up, and still Han was several thousand short. The cargo he carried to Mos Eisley today wouldn't be nearly enough to cover it. Chewbacca gloomily reminded him of the date as they scuffed through the dusty streets to their favorite bar, planning to have a few drinks before facing Jabba. It was an indication of Han's depression that he didn't bother to snap back at his partner. If Jabba would only be willing to grant an extension -- but more likely the old slug had already decided to get nasty this time.

Inside the cantina Han brightened a bit when he saw an old girlfriend -- even a condemned man was entitled to one last bit of fun. Telling Chewbacca to go amuse himself, Han settled into a corner with the friend. Not even a brief altercation involving a blond kid, an unhuman ugly of dubious background, and an old desert type with an ancient weapon distracted his attention for long. A while later, however, the happy couple was interrupted by a Wookiee throat-clearing.

"Chewie, I thought I told you -- "

Chewbacca wasn't impressed. He nodded toward a table at the back and suggested that a charter to Alderaan might be a little more important than cuddling with an attractive female just now. Given a choice, Han would have preferred the cuddling to ferrying the kid and the old man to Alderaan, but there really wasn't a choice involved.

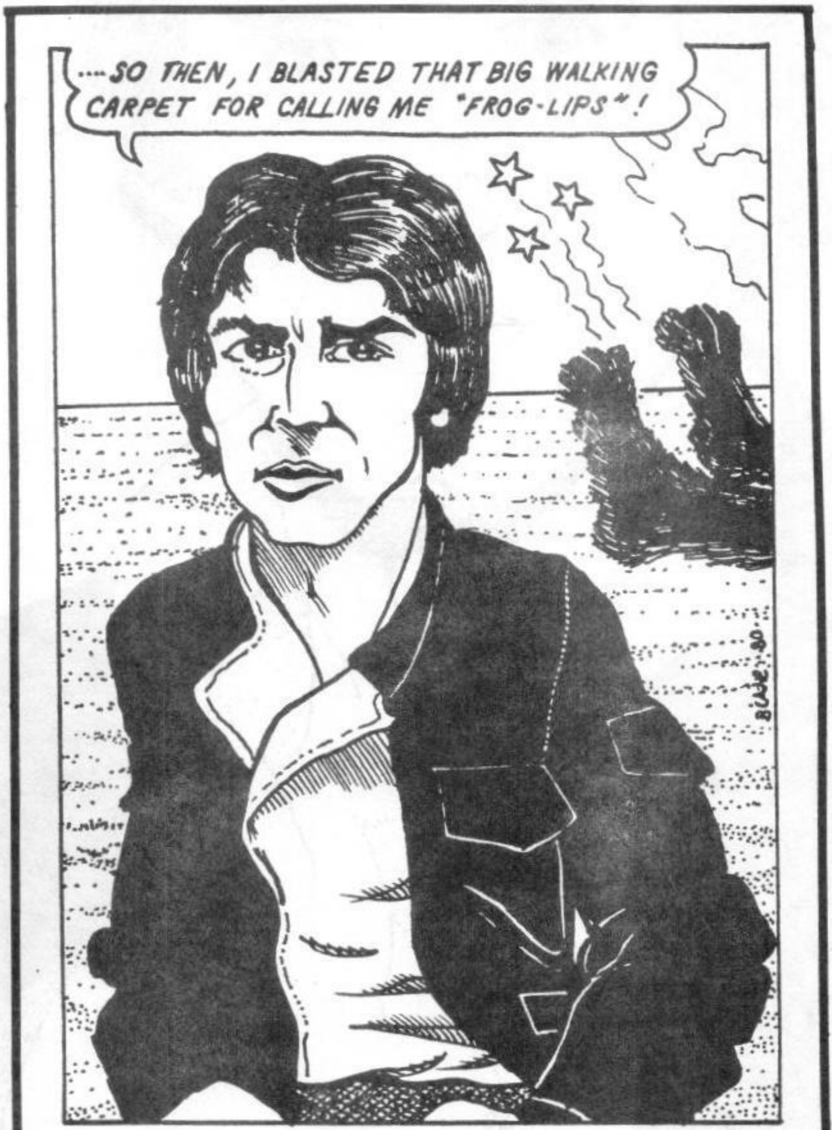
"Okay, Chewie, I'll talk to 'em," he agreed resignedly. "Go keep 'em there for a minute while I say goodbye to Lainie."

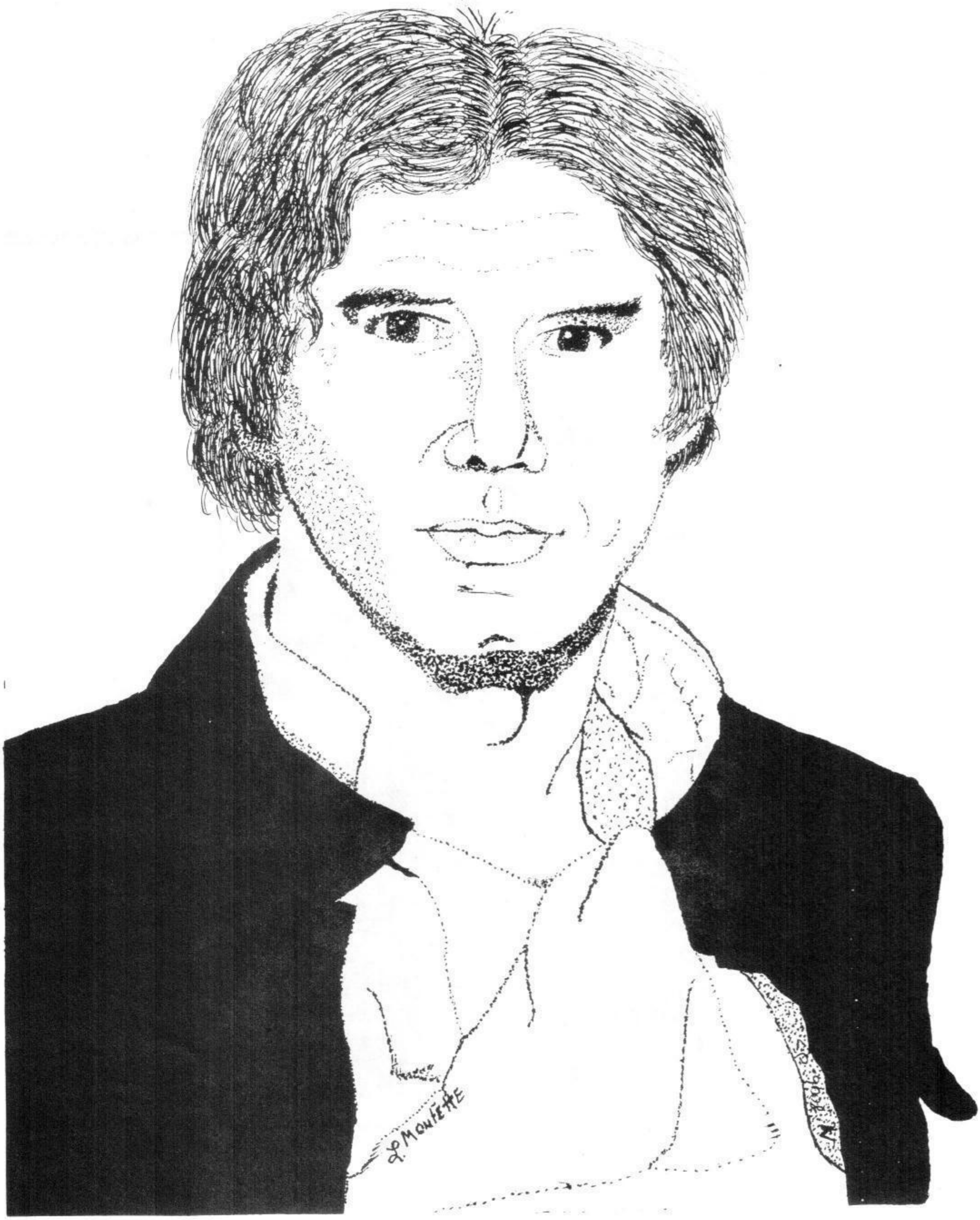
Chewbacca ambled away, and Han turned back to Lainie, who'd only understood the Corellian's half of the conversation. "Sorry, sweetheart, but I gotta go -- business."

She sighed. "Han, love, sometimes I wonder if you care about *anything* but money!"

He kissed her lightly. "Babe, right now it's either make some cold cash or end up cold dead. And I do like to stay warm." Another kiss as she pouted. "It's just a routine charter honey. I'll be back in a couple days and we can pick up where we left off." He patted her cheek and stood up. "I'll keep thinkin' about you so I don't die of boredom."

She smiled cynically and raised her glass to him as he walked away.


...SO THEN, I BLASTED THAT BIG WALKING CARPET FOR CALLING ME "FROG-LIPS"!


L. MONETTE

Captain Solo, You're a Hero

(tune: "My Darling Clementine")

Just like lightnin' with a blaster,
Always ready for a fight;
Saved the rebels from disaster,
Helped the Princess in her plight.

Like a Jedi with his sabre,
Like a Wookiee with his bow,
With the rebels Solo labored,
Helping more than he could know.

Chorus:
Captain Solo, Captain Solo,
Party to the rebel band,
Though you don't know you're a hero
Others help you understand.

It was tough from the beginning,
Luke was there to see you through.
From that point you just kept winning,
With the rebels your luck grew.

The Alliance gained a good friend
When you voted to remain.
They assist with things you must tend,
But they're driving you insane!

Chorus

Lynn

Monfette

The Second Time Around

Chris Jeffords

illustrated by

Becky Aulenbach

"...The next thing he knew, it was dawn and he was the new owner of a service-worn freighter called the Millennium Falcon. The previous owner objected--very briefly: they buried him that afternoon."
--"Smuggler's Passage" by Christine Jeffords, Galactic Flight #1

THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK has established Han Solo as having obtained his Falcon from Lando Calrissian. Since I have no intention of rewriting my personal Solo-past any more than I absolutely have to, I've come up with the following way of juxtaposing it with the version quoted before. Hope you enjoy it.
--The Author.

"Y'know what, Krippo," Han Solo observed to his First (and only) Mate from atop the hull of the *Millennium Falcon*. "I think the markings on this ship of ours have been altered."

Krippo Dzann peered up at him past the starboard bow mandible and grinned knowingly, teeth dazzling in his bluish face. "As if you hadn't been planning on doing the same thing," he said.

Solo looked around for something to throw at the Frith, failed and contented himself with an insulting name. "I mean it," he added. "It ain't that I object to the idea, but I just wonder. I mean, that guy I won her from -- s'pose he could've been doing what we're doing?"

Krippo scrambled up the pointed ladder that leaned against the battered white freighter's portside-aft quarter, and walked across the upper hull, his boots evoking soft echoes from her armor, to join the human who owned two-thirds of ship and profits -- which was fair since it had been Han who'd won her inthe first place, that night on Lorusine three months ago. He peered over the Corellian's shoulder at the markings Solo had been studying, cocking his hairless head from side to side to get all possible casts of light on them. "If he was," Krippo offered, "he must have loved running risks. I mean, where could you hide an illegal cargo on this bird, before you pu in those extra holds last month?"

Han frowned thoughtfully. "Mmm, yeah, you got a point," he agreed. "But look at these--if they're the originals I'll eat my blaster, rig and all."

"So?" Krippos's four mobile antennae performed a complicated little dance on his brow, the Frithian equivalent of a shrug. "If he he wasn't smuggling after all, what difference does it make? If he *was* flying clean the Imps wouldn't have much reason to question the new owner either."

"Maybe yes, maybe no," said Solo. "Like I said, we don't *know*. That's why I was so glad we picked up that last straight laod--it paid real well. We've got money to spare and I want to start making some alterations."

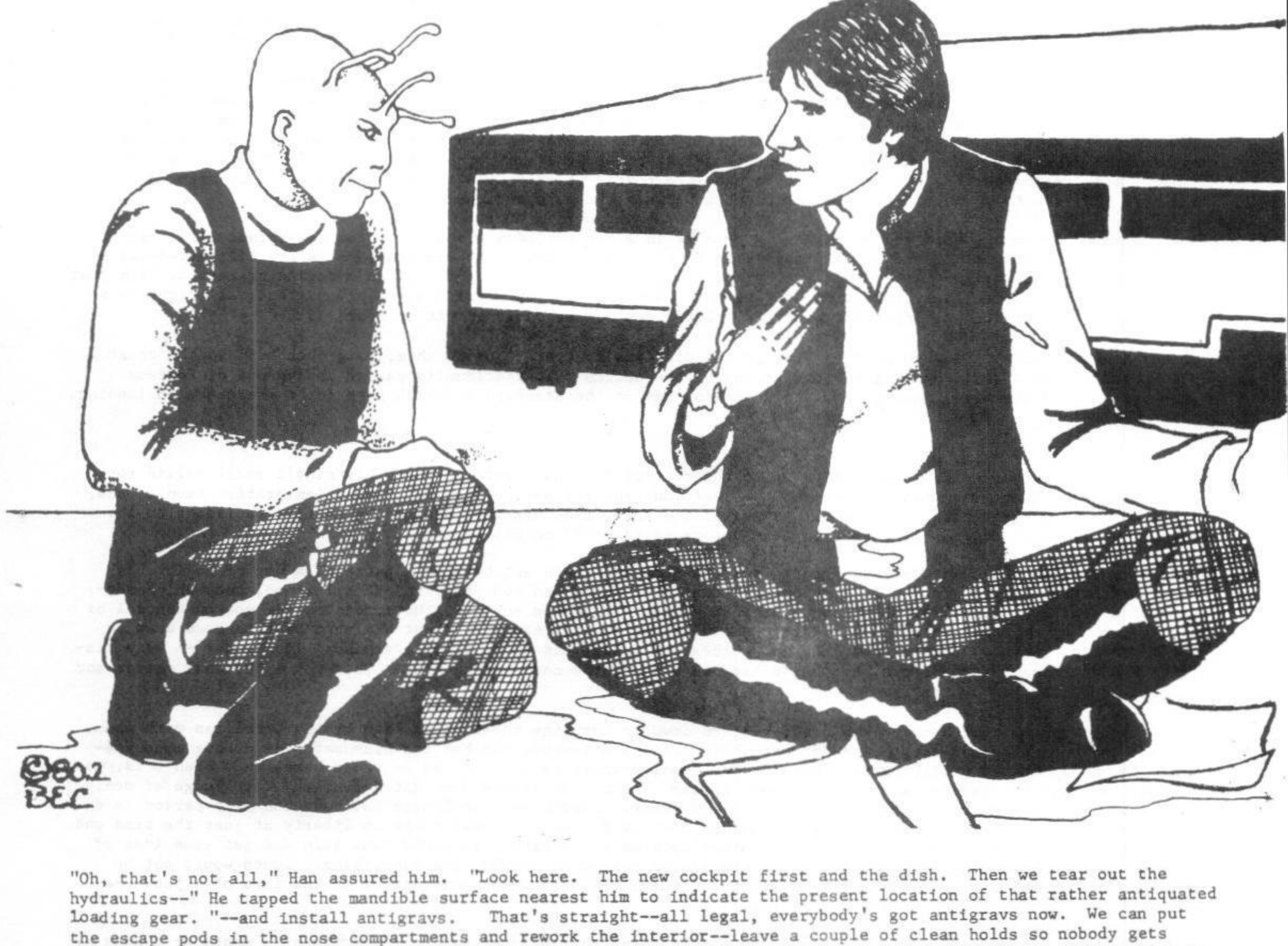
Krippo was immeadiately intrigued. After twelve years of flying and bunking with the eight-years-younger Corellian, he'd developed a vast respect for what seemed to be an instinctive skill with all things technical. "What'd you have in mind?"

Han shifted himself around to settle down cross-legged on the hull plates, digging a sheaf of obviously hand-drawn diagrams out of his inside vest pocket. "We won't be able to do it all at once, of course," he said, spreading the papers on the scarred armorplate. "It'll take money, more money than we've got and time--years, maybe. But, see, I figure this; that damn cockpit, I don't like it--sits right out like a target. I figure we can rip it out and scratch-mount a new one on the starboard side, here ..."

"But that puts the entire hull between us and anything coming up a-port," Krippo objected. "If we're gonna be smuggling we can't afford blind spots."

Solo grinned. "We ain't gonna have any," he said. "I'm plannin' a whole new sensor suite. Ad once introduced me to a guy on Mawson who sould be able to put us in the way of one of those new high-gain dish antennae, the kind that turn on a universal joint--"

"--Like cruisers have?" the Frith finished. He shook his head at Solo's boldness. "Man, have you got plans. And I talked about this ship's last owner lovin to run risks ..."



"Oh, that's not all," Han assured him. "Look here. The new cockpit first and the dish. Then we tear out the hydraulics--" He tapped the mandible surface nearest him to indicate the present location of that rather antiquated loading gear. "--and install antigravs. That's straight--all legal, everybody's got antigravs now. We can put the escape pods in the nose compartments and rework the interior--leave a couple of clean holds so nobody gets suspicious, that way we can haul legal freight when we want to, if it pays enough and we figure we oughtta play it straight for a while. I want to junk thos hyperatomics too--" He paused to glare back over his shoulder at the topside cannon blister. "--they ain't got the kind of firepower we might be needing--"

"--Huh?" said Krippo. "Lon and Edar never complained about the ones we had on the *Thunderbolt*."

"The *Thunderbolt*," said Han patiently, "was Sun-class. We're Planet. Oh, sure, hyperatomics pack a lot of punch, but for targeting something small, like an Imperial interceptor, when the ship herself is dodgin' around like her tail was on fire--an' Planet ships can do that, the *'Bolt* couldn't. 'Sides time I get through with the engines and the sublight maneuvering system..."

"I might have known it," groaned Krippo. "Just like a Corellian, get a ship of your own and you turn into a hotrodder."

Solo looked up from his diagrams. "C'mon, Krip," he said. "You know the score as well as I do. A ship this small can't compete with even somethin' like the *'Bolt* when it comes to runnin' legit. If we ever plan on doin' better than just about makin' a livin', we've *gotta* do business on the side. Lots of it. And that means we'll be runnin' foul of Imps, time to time, and *that* means we gotta be able to outrun, outdodge, or outshoot em'. Hey, look, man. You agreed to all this when I invited you to join up. 'Course if you're havin' second thoughts, why, that's your privilege and if you wanta pull out, I won't hold you back. It'd be different if we were just gonna stick to local-system and interplanetary runs--that's probably what the *Falcon* was built for, before she even got this excuse for a hyperdrive she's carryin'. But I ain't plannin' on bein' fenced like that. For the first time in my life I've got the chance to be my own boss and I won't be held back by some antiquated underpowered drive just 'cause that's what's 'legal' for a ship this size and class. I'm *goin'* places, Krip, an' this is the ship that's takin' me."

Krippo's dark, inscrutable Frithian eyes, narrow and slanted within the slight epicanthic fold of his species, studied the young Corellian with sudden new comprehension. He had never before realized how ambitious Han really was. Solo's vehemence, restrained though it was, was unmistakeable and left no doubt as to his sincerity. And, although the *Millennium Falcon*, like any other Planet-class ships, was equipped to accomodate a permanent crew of up to four, Han could, if necessary, fly her alone for a while, until he found someone else to partner up with him. "All right," he said, recognizing the commitment he made even as he spoke, "what were you planning on?"

Han shuffled through his papers, spreading them liberally about the plating, as the Frith lowered his more-or-less humanoid body to a belly-down sprawl beside him. "First of all," he said, "I don't want to have to keep dependin' on in-port refueling facilities. I figure we can get a ramscoop system put in, it's common enough -- the Imps won't kick about that, and it'll smokescreen the new engine-pack. You remember hearin' about that new experimental model Incom brought out five or six years ago -- Starjammer they called it? Incom's a Corellian company, they're the best in the galaxy for things like that. If we could get our hands on a Starjammer complex we'd have the kick to thumb our noses at everything between the Core and the Rim."

"Mmm," grunted Krippo. "When you go illegal you do it in a big way, don't you? As if a powerplant like that wouldn't be about five times what a ship this size is entitled to have -- those Starjammers are military-development, restricted to strike fighters and such. No, I'm not objecting," he cut off Han's beginning retort, "I'm just pointing out the difficulties of getting hold of one. But I guess you'll find a way around that, all right -- so let's look at the practicalities. Got a stylus? Let's see how we could fit it on board .... "

Neither man nor Frith, absorbed as they were in the diagrams scattered before them, paid much heed to the crash of sundered air as a small passenger liner -- one of the scores that continually passed in and out of Fontema Spaceport here on Ulanor -- passed over their landing bay on the standard approach path for a prescheduled landing.

* * * *

Lando Calrissian debarked from the *Sunspot* with the rest of her passengers, offered his single small valise for customs inspection and submitted quietly to the questions and scanners of the Health and Immigration people, and, having then been pronounced clean in all senses of the word, made his way through the terminal building to the lockers, where he deposited his meager luggage before setting off on his search.

In the six months he's been tracking Syngre and the *Stardust*, he'd established a pattern, a way of posing his questions that smokescreened the true reason for his interest in man and ship; and he'd learned, too, which segments of a port's personnel were apt to be most knowledgeable on the subject. He concentrated, not on Control or Security, but on Maintenance and Engineering, those who personally saw just about any ship that touched down on 'their' tarmac. Anyway, Control and Security -- besides being less accessible to a casual questioner -- were liable to ask questions of their own, and Lando had his reasons for not wanting that. This was a personal matter and he would handle it his own way.

He did rather regret that Syngre was dead, blasted down on Lorusine three months ago by the Corellian with whom he'd been playing star-and-comet, and against whose hand he'd imprudently bet the *Stardust*. He'd have much preferred to settle things with Syngare himself. But then, perhaps this Corellian -- whose name, he'd been told, was Han Solo -- would be reasonable about the whole affair. Lando had always been rated a pretty fair judge of men; he'd taken on Syngre much against his own better judgement, chiefly because Syngre had been the only person he'd been able to find who had the qualifications he was looking for and happened to be at liberty at just the time and on just the planet where Lando had been constrained to seek a new mate. He would find Solo and get some idea of him, and if he seemed honest and competant, there was no reason he should lose everything. Lando would not be averse to offering him some sort of compensation for the *Stardust*, either monetary or in the form of a job. He would, after all, be needing a mate again, now ....

Lando had become so accustomed to coming up dry, to learning that he'd missed the *Stardust* by a month or a week or a day, that when one of the Maintenance people told him the ship was down he almost lost his poise completely. "You're sure?" he demanded. "It was this ship?" He brought out the tridee he'd been using as a jog to people's memories. Fortunately it showed neither himself nor Syngre, only the ship herself, squatting on her hydraulics in a brightly lit bay.

"Positive," agreed his informant after the briefest of glances at the 'dee. "She came in two days ago. We were called in to flush her conduits."

"Which bay is she in?" Lando kept his voice steady by sheer effort of will. At last ....

"109," the attendant told him. "And sure not lifting off in the next few -- you flush the conduits and you get a good look at the tanks while you're at it. She scarcely had enough fuel to clear the traffic-control tower when we got done. The pilot hasn't called for refuelling, either, so she'll be sitting there for a while yet."

Lando returned the 'dee to his wallet, his hand not quite steady. "Thanks a lot," he said, meaning it. "109, you said?"

"You got it," said the attendant. "Funny this Solo should have taken off with you still owing him. From what I've heard of Corellians they never leave anything financial unfinished."

Lando grinned. "Solo was never much of a bookkeeper. Probably he didn't realize he'd been shorted. *I* didn't, until a month or so afterward."

"Well," said the attendant, "I reckon he's gonna be pretty glad to see you, in that case. It's not every man who would go after a fellow he owed money to, instead of just figuring it was the fellow's hard luck."

Lando allowed his grin to broaden. "Let's put it this way. Solo's a Corellian -- I wasn't about to take the risk of him finding out later that I'd made an hoest mistake. He might figure I'd tried to cheat him -- and you know Corellians when they're cheated."

The Maintenance man chuckled appreciatively. "Yeah, I see what you mean. Well, like I said, the ship's in 109 -- Spaceport Communications could probably beam a groundcall over to her, if you want to check ahead and find out if Solo's around the bay."

"Thanks again," said Lando, and he took himself off toward the terminal building, ostensibly to made the suggested call.

But once back in the complex, he kept well away from the public land lines and instead returned to his rented locker. He was not quite certain what the customs on Ulanor might be about people wearing weapons in the terminal, but he did know that there would be no scanners except at sensitive points such as loading ramps and freight-storage sections. He removed his rig and blaster from his valise, buckled them about his middle, and tossed a cape around his shoulders to conceal the weapon beforereturning the grip to his locker and engaging the print lock. He sincerely hoped that Solo would not turn out to be another Syngre, but it he did -- Lando had, he hoped, learned his lesson. He did not intend to be caught short a second time.

* * * *

"Han Solo?"

Han turned at the sound of his name, locating the speaker almost immediately. He stood in the open arch of the loading vestibule, a rather handsome black man of Solo's own approximate height and build, though he was, Han guessed, a few years older. He wore almost standard spacer's dress -- an open necked blue shirt, tight pants, knee boots,a lace-up vest, all beneath an incongruous flowing cape, one side of which had been tossed back over his shoulder to display the blaster strapped to his hip. The weapon had the look of having seen considerable use but the man did not stand as if he wished or expected to need to draw it. His right hand was hooked casually through the belt, just next to the heavy plate buckle. His expression was neutral, though his eyes shifted hungrily from Han to the *Falcon,* whose landing gear he'd been checking out with a scanner/calibrator he'd found in the onboard tool locker.

"Yeah, that's me," Han agreed. "Can't say I've had the pleasure."

"My name's Lando Calrissian," the other answered readily. "Sweet-looking ship you've got there."

"She'll do," Solo conceded, being much too canny to mention his projected alterations until he knew something more of his visitor. He narrowed his eyes slightly as he tried to place the connection in which he'd heard that surname. One of the lesser ducal families, he thought it was -- if this Lando was a son of that line, he'd be a baron, Han guessed, though he'd never claimed to be particularly up on his peerage. Immediately Solo was suspicious. To him, nobility suggested Imperials, and he had no particular reasons to like or trust Imperials, especially not with the plans he had for his ship. And what would a blooded baron be doing roving unattended about Fontema spaceport with spacer's clothes on and a blaster at his hip?

Lando noted the change in the Corellian's expression and his heart sank as he concluded, mistakenly, that Syngre had been bragging, that Solo knew the background of the ship he'd won and was aware of the identity of the man he faced. Before Han could make a move, he quickly freed his gunhand from his belt and whipped it back to bring his blaster smoothly up and out with a speed that left the Corellian dumbfounded. Han had never expected such gunfighterish facility from one of the pampered nobility.

"Don't try it, Solo," Calrissian warned. "Believe me, I regret this necessity sincerely -- but I mean to have my ship back."

"Your ship?" Han repeated, then shifted his emphasis as a dim comprehension came to him. *"Your* ship? What in hell's flaming blue name have I got to do with any ship of yours?"

"You're standing in front of it," Lando told him. "Or are you going to claim you don't know?"

"Damn straight!" snapped Han. "Man, I never saw you in my life, and I ain't got the faintest glimmering what you are talkin' about. I won this ship fair and square, at star-and-comet on Lorusine three months ago."

"Oh, come on, Solo, don't give me that," said Calrissian impatiently. "I saw how you were looking at me just now. You won it, yes, I know that. But you know *what* you won, and who it belonged to."

"You're spacehappy," Han said. "It belonged to the guy I won it from -- who else would it belong to?"

Lando sighed wearily. "Let's not talk in circles," he proposed. "I'm perfectly willing to compensate you for any expense you've incurred since you left Lorusine -- fuel, port fees, that sort of thing. And of course you're free to removed your personal possessions from the *Stardust* before you go .... "

"Stardust?" Han echoed. "This ship's the *Millennium Falcon!"*

Lando nodded. "Yes, I know, Syngre changed her name and markings and reworked her registration. But the *Stardust* is what I named her, and that's what she still is to me."

It was at some point during this conversation that Krippo, who'd been wedged into the *Falcon's* onboard engineering compartments with a calibrator and a note block, crawled out backwards, stood , stretched, and headed for the main lock to rejoin Han. He paused at the sound of two voices, one of them unfamiliar, and after a moment's hesitation he crept quietly on until he stood just inside the lock, listening to the exchange. He no more comprehended than Han did what all this might mean, but he knew he didn't like the sound of it.

Thinking quickly, he reversed his course and made his way through the after passage to the large portside compartment, which had a lock and ramp of its own to facilitate the loading and unloading process. This lock was not in use at the moment, and was shut, but it eased quietly up when Krippo hit the release. Hidden by the bulk of the ship, he swarmed agilely up the support post of the ramp and crawled carefully across the upper hull, skirting the central cannon blister. Near the starboard rim of the ship's ellipse, he flattened himself still more closely to her armor and reached back to slide his blaster from its holster.

Han and the stranger were still very much occupied with each other, and the latter apparently had no hint or thought that Han might not have been alone. After a moment's consideration, Krippo snapped his blaster's selection to light stun. Then, bracing the weapon with both hands, he sighted carefully on Calrissian's chest and squeezed the trigger.

Han jumped at the distinctive sound of a stun-set blaster. Calrissian folded without a sound as Krippo swung his legs over the edge of the hull and dropped to the ground. "What gives?"

"Search me," said Han. "Somethin' about the *Falcon* being called the *Stardust*, and about it belongin' to him." With the immediated threat to himself removed, Han's curiosity was getting the better of him and he directed a quizzical look at the unconscious Calrissian. "Suppose we drag him aboard and wait till he wakes up. I'd like to find out just what the hell is going on here."

"You're the Captain," shrugged Krippo. "You take his shoulders, I'll take his feet."

* * * *

Lando woke painfully, comprehending almost immediately what must have happened to him, (though not how) and greatly surprised to find himself waking up at all. The fact that he was still alive set him to re-ordering his ideas. Either Solo had not in fact known the truth about Syngre, or he was a great deal more complex than Lando had first expected.

Lando blinked, trying to focus. Two indistinct blurs resolved themselves into the faces of Han Solo and an inscrutable bluish Frith, the former sitting on a packing crate beside the acceleration couch on which Lando was lying, the latter watching over his shoulder. "How're you feeling, Calrissian?" Solo inquired. "Sorry we ain't got anything for a headache, but it'll pass quick enough; you just got a light stun. By the way," he said, indicating the Frith, "this is my first mate Krippo Dzann. He's the one you can thank for the way you hurt about now."

Lando sighed. "And I thought I'd learned my lesson," he said. "So, now what happens?"

"Well, that kinda depends," observed Solo. "I mean, if you knew I won this ship, you must have known I couldn't make heads of tails of what you were sayin' about ownin' her. Suppose you start from the beginning and give us the whole story, and we'll go on from there."

"You mean Syngre wasn't bragging about what he pulled?" Lando inquired.

"Syngre?" Han echoed. "Who's Syngre?"

"The man you won the ship from," Lando told him. "You mean you don't ask people their names when you get into a game with them?"

"Why should I, if they don't want to volunteer 'em?" responded the Corellian. "A man's name is his own business. A game is for playing and winning. Two different things. Like I said, why don't you start from the beginning?"

"I guess I should at that," Lando agreed. "All right. It goes back about eight months -- I was on Chanerew and my first mate had just left me for greener pastures. I had a pretty good navigator and comm officer, but neither of them could quite fill his place. So I went hunting for someone who could."

He'd found only Synre, and though he'd been warned that the man's reputation was not of the best-- had indeed not fully trusted Syngre himself -- he'd preferred to keep in mind that a first mate in the hand was worth several who might or might not be available on other planets. So he'd taken him on with the mental reservation that as soon as he could find someone as well or better qualified and more trustworthy, he'd drop him again.

For two months, however, all went smoothly and Syngre showed no sign of being anything other than honest, loyal and dependable. Lando began to figure that his instincts had fallen down on the job for once.

Then the *Stardust* called at Tokta, the home of a warm-blooded and oxygen-breathing but not in the least humanoid race; and Syngre saw his chance. He invited his Captain and crewmates to be his guests for a night on the town, claiming he'd won big in a game just before they'd left their last port of call and had had no chance to spend any of it. They consented willingly enough, and Syngre took the lead. After they'd stopped at two or three cantinas and were all somewhat the worse for wear on account of Syngre's generosity (he definitely did have some money) , he came up with a new revelation. He'd been to Tokta before, he said, and he knew a small bar, very out of the way, that had a bartender whoese creative skill at inventing drinks was beyond description. Right down this alley, he said ....

Lando and his navigator and comm officer scarcely noticed it in the dark when Syngre fell quietly behind them. The first warning they had was when his blaster cut the navigator down in her tracks.

They were found the next morning by several Toks, who carried them to shelter and did what little they could. But, not being even remotely humanoid, the Toks had little comprehension of the human anatomy and how to doctor it. They genuinely tried, but only Lando survived, and even he was bedridden for nearly a month.

Fortunately he was able to get a ship the very day he left the Toks' improvised hospital. There was never any doubt in his mind as to what he would do. Laboriously he traced Syngre and the *Stardust* -- or as he quickly learned she was now called, the *Millennium Falcon* -- from star system to star system, and at last to Lorusine, where he arrived six weeks after the death of his double-crossing First at Solo's hands. From there he'd found the trail fairly clear; Solo, unlike Syngre, had had no reason to obscure it, though even Syngre, Lando felt sure, had not expected that any of his former mates had survived. "So here I am," he finished, "and here you are, and here's my ship. Now what?"

"*My* ship," said Han. "You tell a real good story, Calrissian, but I ain't heard any proof yet."

"All right." Lando thought a moment. "It wouldn't do any good to give you her original hull markings and registration, because Syngre changed them when he gave her a new name. But I can tell you she's a Starmaster freighter built in 5922 by Chrystone Pioneer Hulls, gross tonnage 130,750 kilograms, 21.5 meters beam, 36.5 overall length, airfram serial number SM266/13844-722-B. You can check that out if you want."

Solo shuttled his eyes to the Frith, who quietly removed himself and, after an interval, came back. "He's right, Han. About the airframe number, anyway."

"And since it's on the inside, he sure didn't have any chance to get a look at it before -- unless, like he says, he's flown the ship before," Solo observed. "Just one snag, Calrissian; how do we know it wasn't Syngre who was the rightful captain like he claimed, and you maybe an old enemy of his, or a disgruntled ex-employee with a grudge?"

"Oh, I can prove my identity easily enough, if that's what you want," Calrissian told him. "You wouldn't even have to contact my family. I've owned that ship since I was twenty-two; there are any number of people around the Galaxy I've dealt with, people who'll recognize and vouch for me."

Han considered this. "Sounds reasonable," he conceded. "Except there's something else you ain't thought of, maybe. Which is, even if Krippo and I buy every single word you've said, you still ain't got a legal leg to stand on."

"What!" exclaimed Lando, sitting up sharply and immediately regretting it. "She's mine! You received stolen goods ... "

"Aw, hell, man," said Solo, "if everybody that received stolen good was obliged to give 'em back to their rightful owners, the galaxy's economy would collapse!" This was said in jest, but immediately Solo leaned a little forward, his keep features intense. "Lemme explain a few facts to you, Calrissian. We're living under an Empire now, not a Republic. Now Imperial bureaucrats are a greedy lot, and the high military brass ain't a whole lot better, on account of they got promoted 'cause they were loyal to the whole changeover in the first place. So a few years back they passed a new law. I can't quote you all the fancy legal language, but what it boils down to is this: if a third party receives something which is later claimed to've been stolen, and unless the original owner can force a confession of theft out of the person he claims stole it, the guy that's got it can keep it. It's sort of an adaptation of that old saw about possession bein' nine parts of the law. Dallin only knows how they pushed it through the Senate, but they did. "Course the main idea was to make sure that if a bureaucrat or some military brass hat saw something they wanted, he could send a batch of storm troopers to seize it and then take it from them when they they got back. Then, seein' as stormtroopers would never confess to a civilian that they'd stolen something belongin' to him and seeing' that they're so damned anonymous in that armor that the original owner'd never be able to track down the specific troopers responsible anyhow, the guy they'd snatched it for would get to keep it all legal and aboveboard. And at the same time, if anybody stole something from an Imp, the Imp could always fetch in the Inquisitorial section to force a confession out of the thief , so that even if the stolen item had been passed on, it could be recovered. So that no matter what, the Imp's property rights, so called, were as airtight as a new spacesuit. But the final effect was to make theft generally almost as safe as houses. With Syngre dead, there's no way you can get a confession out of him. I won your ship all fair and aboveboard and I can produce twenty witnesses on Lorusine who'll swear to that. Under the law as it stands, someone like me who receives stolen goods innocently, without even havin' any hint that they're stolen, is doubly safe. "Course, you bein' nobility, you could probably find ways to get around that, but it'd take years -- even supposing that Krippo and me were about to let you walk out of here to initiate the process. And I ain't yet decided whether we would."

"I don't really think I could," Lando observed, without really noticing what he was saying. "I'm more or less the black sheep of the family -- it was all I could do to get my father to supply me with money to track Syngre down. He only agreed to it because I told him it was personal -- a matter of honor, so to speak. After all, the man had killed both my other officers and laid me up badly for quite a while. If I came up with a request for him to throw his wealth and prestige behind an effort to legally recover my ship from a third party, and that one a common Corellian spacer, he'd disown me."

Solo cocked his head to one side. "You sound kinda like an old shipmate of mine, when you talk like that. Hey, Krip, you remember Milas and the way his dad reacted when he ran off to join the '*Bolt?*"

The Frith nodded. Han looked thoughtful for a moment. "'Scuse me a sec, Calrissian. I've got this idea rattling around in my head." He rose, drawing the Frith with him to the far side of the main cabin. They conversed in undertones while Lando watched, puzzled. The Frith's antennae waved wildly in agitation; whatever his captain was proposing apparently sounded less than wise to him. At length, however, he flung out his six-fingered hands in a gesture of exasperated surrender, and they came back to where Lando sat, waiting for them.

"Tell you what I'm gonna do," said Solo. "You had a pretty hard time of it, from what you've told us, and the way you talk about your dad reminds me of a real good pal of mine. So I'm gonna give you a chance to get your ship back. You play star-and-comet?"

"Of course," said Lando.

"Ok. See, this kind of appeals to my sportin' instincts. We'll find the best cantina in town and lay the deal out to the customers, and then we'll play five games of star-and-comet for the *Falcon*, or the *Stardust*, whichever name you prefer. Best out of five takes her; the customers can witness who wins. Sound good to you?"

"Hell, I've got no other choice!" said Lando. "At least this way I've got a chance. And as I told you before, if I do win I'll reimburse you for any expenses you've incurred."

Solo grinned. "First," he suggested, "let's see you win. Shake on it?" He offered his hand.

Lando gripped it with sincere feeling, taking pleasure in the Corellian's firm return clasp. It came to him that he could, with very little inducement, come to like Han Solo very much. He somewhat regretted what he already knew he was going to have to do ....

* * * *

The cantina on which Solo and Calrissian settled for their game was not overpopulated with customers when they arrived, but word of what they intended spread quickly, and by the time they were ready to begin playing the place was crowded with interested spectators. The bartender, who had witnessed the document of ownership they'd prepared and was also serving as stakeholder, was beginning to feel very pleased that they'd chosen his place.

A last minute alteration in the rules had been proposed by Calrissian, involving a few trial hands to give each player an idea of how the other handled his tiles. These took most of a timepart. Ulanor's sun was just setting when they finally got down to business.

First deal was Calrissian's, since the 'duel' had been propsed by Solo . Han, however, was not as easily fooled as Lando had thought. He had seen from the beginning that even during the trial hands Calrissian had been cheating mildly, as if to see if he would be caught. Han did not call him on it. It was always useful to see how another man cheated; it could teach you a lot about how he would play straight. The trial hands were, after all, not important, the ship was not being staked on them. Han could even understand why Calrissian might consider cheating once the play began. The man intrigued his hugely. He would humor him along.

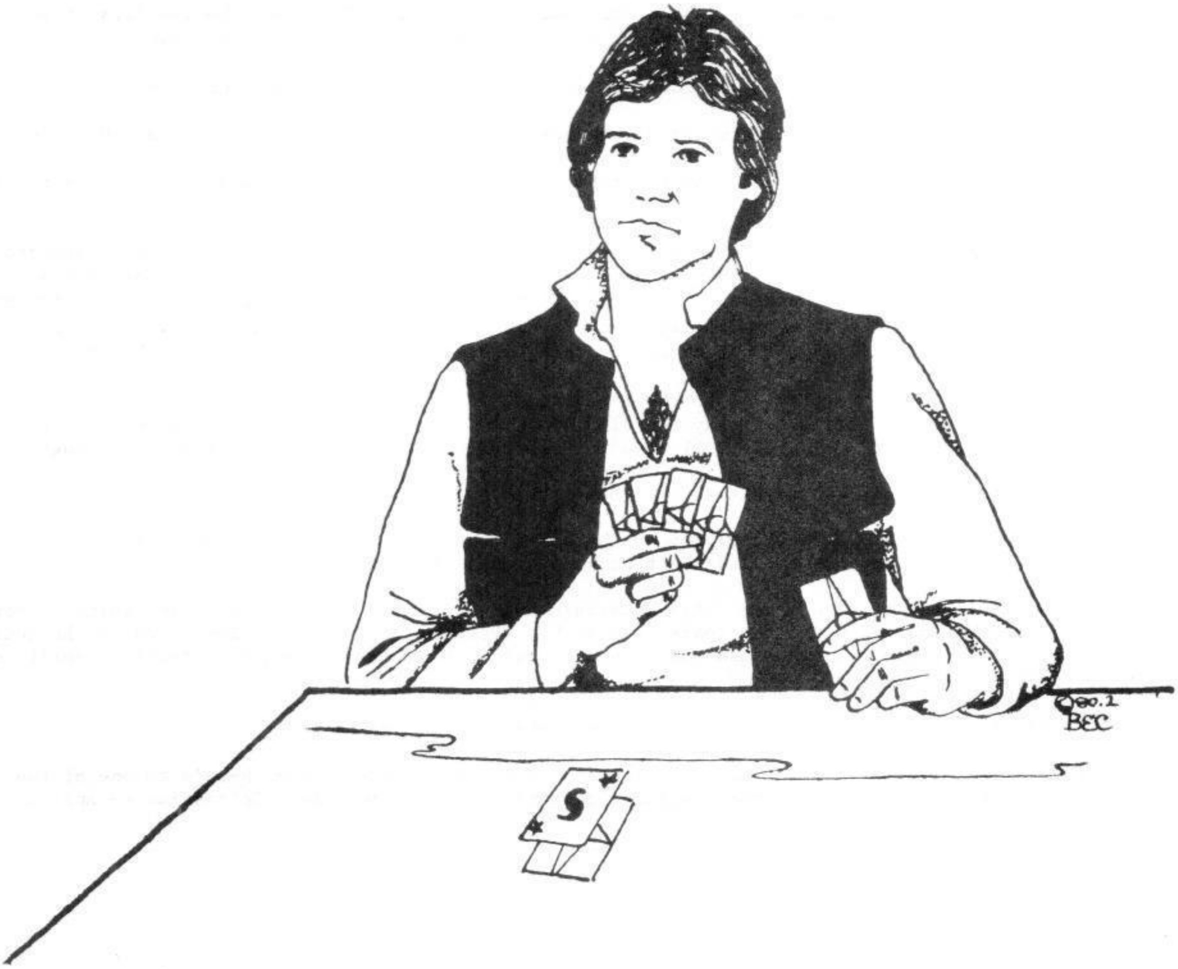
Syngre, back on Lorusine, had accused Solo of cheating, after that final hand on which the ship had changed hands. Solo had not, in fact, been doing any such thing. He had, of course, had to shoot Syngre after that, in self-defense as much as to avenge his own honor. He knew that if Calrissian chose to cheat, he would have every cause -- provided he could prove that cheating had in fact taken place -- to abrogate the terms of their agreement and even shoot the reckless young baron down where he sat. But he did not want to do this. The first hand went to Calrissian. So did the second. Solo's expression betrayed nothing of what he was planning.

The crowd of customers who surrounded their table watched with bated breath. The next game would be the turning point. If Calrissian won it, there would be no reason to continue. If Solo won it, the duel could still go either way.

Solo by now had a very good picture of the tricks Calrissian used. The man was good, very subtle and very careful, what Han's old crewmate Dere d'Netrab would have called a 'gentlemanly cheat.' Dere, however, had taught Han how to deal with all kinds of cheats, gentlemanly or not. Han 'switched over' and put his own skills into high gear. The third game drew out in a sort of silent struggle, and then Calrissian, looking at once confused and disgusted, threw down his tiles. Han did not so much as smile as Krippo moved a marker from the center of the table to a spot beside his elbow, mirroring the two which lay in a similar position before Calrissian.

The fourth game was Han's again. The spectators leaned forward in taut excitement. Again there was a turning point. This next hand would tell the tale.

Han sneaked a quick look at Krippo. The Frith's flat bluish face was unreadable; even his eyes showed no betraying sparkle. But Krippo had also studied under Dere, and Solo did not doubt in the least that he knew exactly what his captain was doing, and why.



Twenty centiparts later the two men laid down their tiles. For a moment both were silent, eyeing each other with a sort of quietly nervous anticipation. Then Calrissian sighed an slumped back in his chair. "All right, Solo. The *Stardust* is yours."

The crowd cheered. It would, of course have cheered as readily for Calrissian as for the Corellian.

The bartender came over with the stakes. Signatures were affixed in the proper places and the document handed to Solo. He tucked it into his vest, his sharp-featured face glowing with pleasure. "C'mon, Calrissian," he offered. "Lemme buy you a drink or two anyway. You gave me a pretty hard time there -- I owe you that much."

"Well, all right," Lando assented. "I guess it wouldn't be very sporting of me to hold a grudge."

A few timeparts later, when 'a drink or two' had turned into a full bottle, Solo made a new suggestion. "Let's go back to the *Falcon*. I got some really prime stuff in one of the lockers, an' we really oughtta drink to a ship's change of owners right on board her."

Calrissian, who by now was not in the best of shape, agreed. The two men had to help each other up, Krippo lending his aid at intervals. Arms around each other's shoulders, with the Frith walking alongside in case of accidents, they made their unsteady way back to the *Millennium Falcon's* docking bay. Han, after a few moments' disorientation, managed to remember which locker he'd put the brandy in. It was Tellumar, one of the finest in the galaxy. He poured two brimming glasses, sloshing a little of the amber-brown liquid on the plot table, and lifted his glass in a toast. "To the *Millennium Falcon* -- may she fly free forever!"

"Hear, hear," agreed Calrissian in a slurred voice. "Are you gonna keep that name for her?"

"Why not? 'S a good soundin' name, 'n' a good lucky name for a smugglin' ship -- strong and fast an' free for a thousan' years."

"Gonna use her for smugglin'?" Lando cocked a rather beary eye at the Corellian.

"Gonna use her to make money, any way I can," Solo said. "You wait a year or two, you won' even reckanize her time I get done fixin' her up."

Lando grunted and held out his glass for a refill., which Han readily supplied. "This mus' be the firs' time in history that the same guy ever won the same ship twice in a row. Your luck, Solo, is unbelievable."

Han winked broadly. "Not luck - skill. You're jus' lucky I didn't shoot you. I had a right, y'know."

"Huh?" Calrissian straightened, blinking, as the import of the words sank slowly into his brandy-fogged brain.

Solo grinned. "Show you what I mean." He turned from the table and began ransacking lockers. "Now where t'hell did I ... "

Krippo thrust a sealed star-and-comet deck under his captain's nose. The Corellian blinked at it, then grinned even more broadly and took it back to the table. He sat down, broke the seal, shuffled, and dealt himself a full 'constellation', the highest hand in the game. For the next twenty centiparts , drunk as he was, he showed Calrissian a half dozen crooked shuffles at every variation of the game, and then at Galactic Dragon, and Black Hole, dealing from the top, the center, and the bottom of the deck. Not once could Calrissian catch him.

"See?" he said at length. "I knew you were tryin' to cheat me, right from the start, an' I knew why. I jus' played along with you to give the audience a thrill. I play any kind of game I happen to be in, Calrissian. If it's honest, I play it that way. But if it's crooked, I'll have your shirt, pants and socks before we're through."

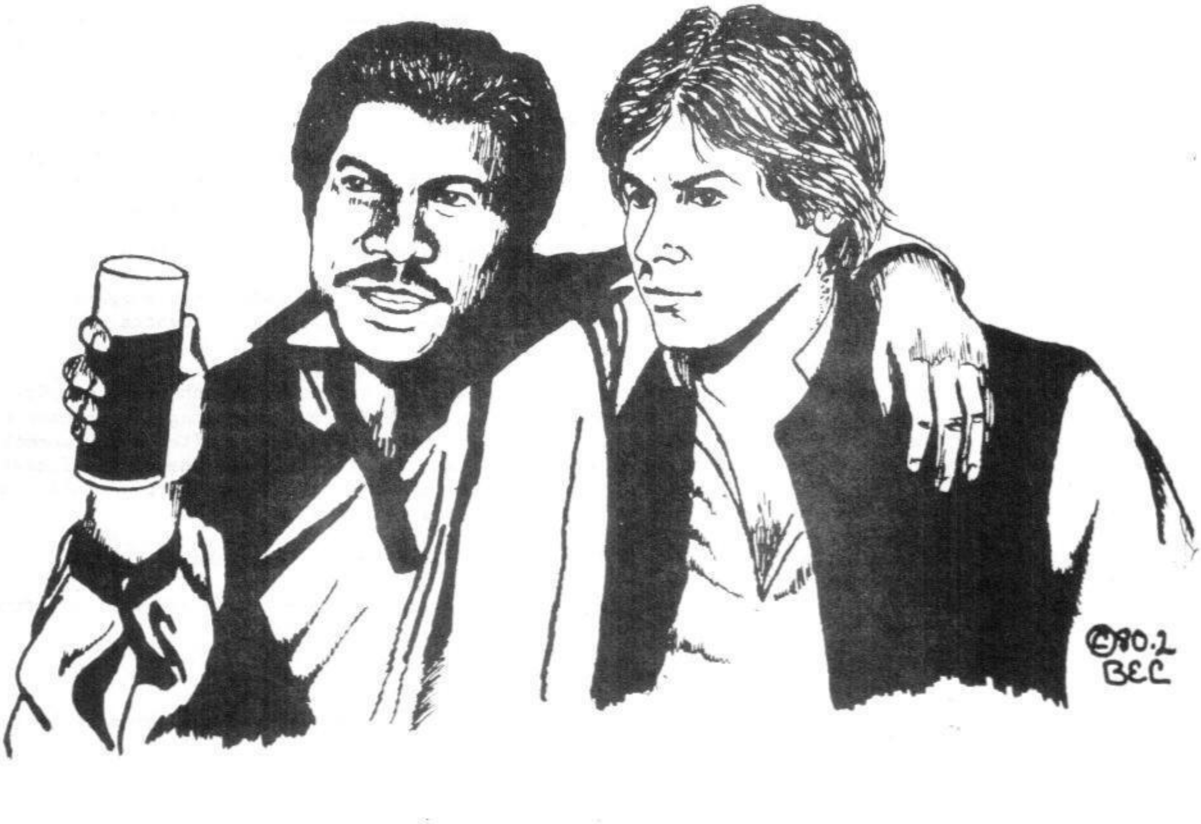
Lando was my this time about half sober with amazement. "Doesn't anyone ever catch you?"

"Nobody has yet," Solo answered blithly. "I was taught by the best." He picked up the star-and-comet deck again, shuffled it, had Lando cut three times in turn, and dealt himself a constellation again.

Lando looked at it for several moments with a comically uncertain expression on his face, and then, quite without warning, he began to laugh. He laughed until the tears came to his eyes and his belly muscles ached and he could scarcely get his breath. "Solo, Solo, you're a man after my own heart. I like you , you know that? I really do. I mean, suns, what a beautiful joke on me!"

Han began to chuckle himself. "It is, ain't it? But I tell you what -- call me Han."

"Sure enough, Han," agreed the other. "And I'm Lando." He reached for his glass. "Hey, here's to one of the unlikeliest friendships in the long history of the civilized galaxy! Han Solo and Lando Calrissian -- and to Syngre for bringing us together!"



An Honest Job

Elyse Dickenson

illustrated by Larry Blake

"Are you sure this is going to work?"

A bloodshot pair of eyes glared in his direction. "Of course. Damn, Wyth, do you always have to be so pessimistic?"

The smaller man shuffled his feet, then grumbled something unintelligible. "Well, it's not going according to plan."

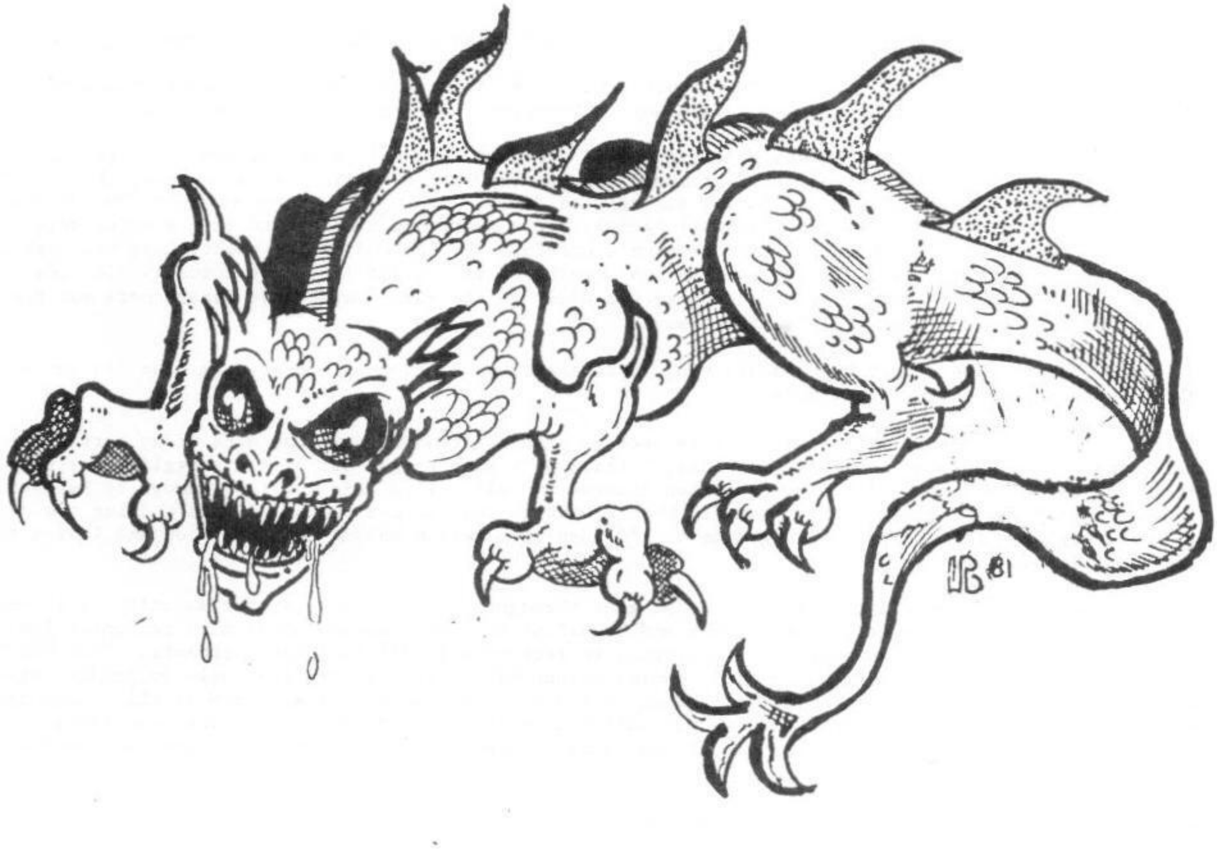
Dekan Holth ignored the remark for the moment, shifting his small lightbeam to his belt, where he found the right set of tweezers and the minute vial of glue. Removing the small information chip from his breast pocket, he dabbed a small dot of glue to its backside, then began carefully applying it to the designated carrier.

"It's just going to have to do," he said. "Actually, this is a great opportunity. The authorities will never in a hundred years think of looking in this cargo. I mean, this is rather far-fetched as smuggling goes. And the pilot? He doesn't even know he's doing it!"

"Yeah, but what if he gets stopped or something?" came a dour voice from behind him.

Holth, the eternal optimist, just snorted at the mere suggestion of it. "This is a totally honest, legal transaction. The papers are all in order, the pilot seems okay from what I've seen, though a bit on the rowdy side, and it's such a short hop, you know. We certainly can't smuggle it in on our own. We might get caught."

Wyth moved away and began pacing about the small storeroom. As he weaved in and out amongst the multitude of small sel-metal cages, he muttered to himself on the total insanity of the whole situation. He stopped to stare into one of the stacked cages and found four small beady eyes glaring back at him. Rows of glittering white, needle sharp teeth napped at him, and the two Otren monitors hissed quietly, then slithered back into the dark recesses of the cage.



"And how ... " he gestured his hands toward the cage before him, cautiously insuring that he didn't get his fingers too near, "how are they going to find the chip?

"Sssh!" snapped Holth. "Now look," he complained, "you've gotten them all riled up." They both looked around, nervous at the sound of the many lizards which were now awake due to the human intruders, and they voiced their disquiet by hissing and emitting high-pitched squealing noises.

Holth dropped the one lizard, to which he had implanted the chip on a row of its back scales, back into its cage and securely locked the top, then placed the cage atop another.

"Look," said Holth in an annoyed tone. "I'm going to relay them the information. They'll get the stupid chip off the right lizard. It can't be that hard -- there're only 25 of them here. Besides, we've done our part. It's up to them to carry out the rest."

"But if they're all sold out before they can get to them?"

Holth stifled a noise of rage. "They won't!" he whispered savagely. "Now come on. We've got to get out of here before we're discovered."

Wyth nodded, then followed his companion out of the storeroom.

* * * *

Another in a never-ending series of rainstorms was blowing in over Margate Port, whipping gusty winds through the broad streets, stirring up the silvery sand and depositing it momentarily atop the numerous low-level buildings which surrounded the main docking ports.

Luke Skywalker brought his fur-lined collar close up to his chin as a strong gust of cold air hit against him, blowing his locks of blond hair into a disorganized mess. Shifting his booted feet, he let his glance stray once more around the spacious, open bay. He'd only been on-planet for ten days, but in those days he'd really come to enjoy being there, despite the ever-present Imperial troopers that were scattered throughout the cities like a persistant virus. He couldn't believe that immense fir tree forests like those on Tager existed. Tall, gigantic trees that were constantly in motion, swaying about as Tager's storm winds blew in from the northern region. And the sky, always a deep, dark blue-grey. Not once did he have to bother with squinting in order to see because the sun's rays rarely appeared in the sky long enough to bother anyone, though the ultra-violet rays did come through to help the plant life thrive. He drew in one last deep breath of fresh cool air, then turned to face his companions.

Chewbacca was leaning against the bulkhead of the *Falcon*, rubbing his face gently along the bridge of the nose. Another celebration like the one last night would certainly be the death of him, he mused in discomfort. That stupid rebel and *his* exotic drinks.

Han Solo stretched his arms behind him and yawned widely. "Well, kid, it was nice of you to drop by like this," he remarked, staring momentarily at his somewhat ill co-pilot. "Though, uh, next time you decide to show *us* around the town, let us pick out the bar. Look what you've done to poor Chewie here," he motioned.

Luke shrugged his shoulders. "Gee, Han, I thought you two could drink anything. You're always boasting."

Han made a sour face at the young Jedi. "Sure, liquor, stuff like that, kid. Not that organic whatever you fed us last night." He held his hand up to motion Luke not to interrupt. "Even if it was your treat."

Luke supressed his laugh. The night before had been one of the best he's had in recent months. With no fear of being being intercepted by Imperials, spies or troopers,and bumping into Han Solo the day before, they'd all gone to a quiet little spot that Luke had found during his stay on Tager. No alcoholic beverages were served there (which explained why Han didn't know of the establishment), but the organic liquids and treats which were offered instead did have their debilitating effects if one wasn't careful. By the end of the night, Luke was feeling more chipper than ever, talking away a mile a minute; Han was trying to figure out if he was actually floating around or or if it was what he'd just eaten; and the Wookiee was oddly quiet, making a strange remark here and now again. Now came the time for them to part their seperate ways.

"Sure you don't want to come along? I could use you," Luke asked, unconsciously repeating a line Han had asked him nearly two years ago on Yavin IV's moon.

"Nah," remarked Han off-handedly. "Besides, you've used me enough already. Have had more of my services for less money than I would have accepted otherwise. 'Sides, I think it's time to get out of the smuggling business and try something honest. Got the *Falcon's* registration changed and all. I've laid low long enough to keep those Imperials off my back, and I've definitely decided that I want to stay in one piece. I wasn't doing too good with that goal staying with you guys. You got me so I'd jump if a person walked into the room and I didn't know him. Imperial spies and all."

Luke shortly reflected back on all the misery Han had gone through for the Rebellion, the majority of it being thrust upon him by both Luke and Leia prodding him and beguiling him into mission after mission, until Han, sick of being shot up, declined any more missions -- anything in fact -- and left the base posthaste. That had been over three months ago, and Luke was glad to find, coming across Han, that the Corellian held no grudges against Luke, Leia or anyone in the Rebellion. It was just as he had said, he needed a rest from it all. Luke didn't think it would be wise to add that the Rebellion was suffering slightly from the lack of the best freighter pilot ever to land in their docking bays. It was totally up to Han whether or not he wanted to come back to the base or not.

"Now that I've got myself an honest job -- " began Han.

Luke laughed out loud at the mere mention of it, clasping his arms to his stomach as he stumbled back a few steps, totally succumbing to the laughter. Han with an honest job? After all the speeches he'd made on base saying that smuggling was his only life?

The Corellian patiently waited until Luke had laughed himself breathless, then spoke up in a louder voice. "Luke, is it that hard for you to accept that I've finally gotten myself an honest deal, one where nobody's gonna shoot my tail off?"

Luke straightened up from his slightly bent position, wiped some tears from his eyes, and replied, grinning, "Yes."

"No wonder I left the Alliance," replied Han. "It was you." He pointed an accusing finger toward Skywalker.

"All right, all right, guilty as charged," admitted Luke freely. He smiled broadly then sighed. "Well, I guess it's goodbye for a while."

"Yeah, see you around. Just don't get yourself blown to pieces on another one of your half-ass missions," he cautioned lightly.

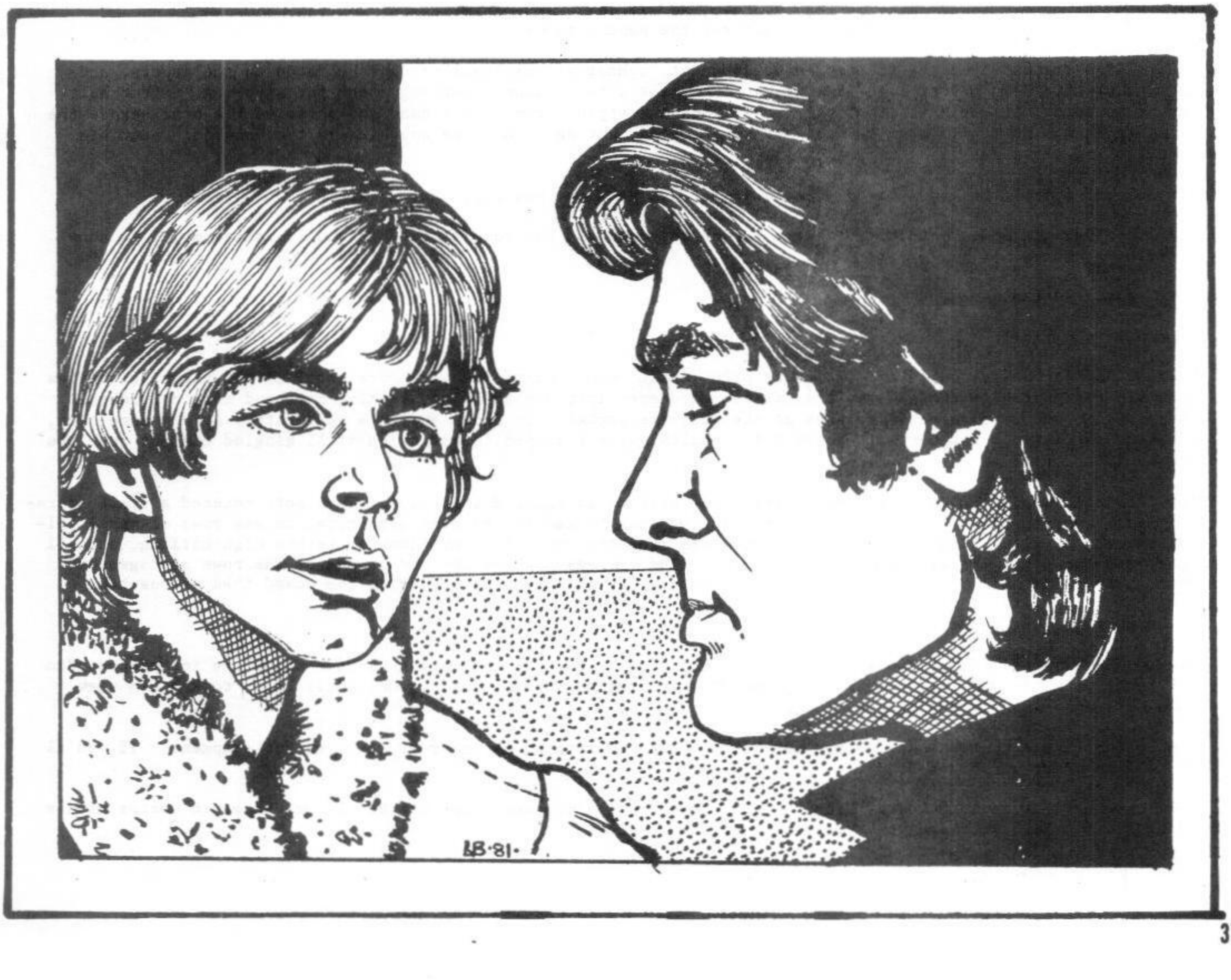
"I'll take good care of myself, Han," answered Luke. "This mission I'm on right now is very safe. Just have to organize a pick-up mission on another planet, then it's back to base. The guys here have already planned how to smuggle the stuff out so it's just about done."

Han's eyes narrowed slightly. "Your guys know how to smuggle? The expert isn't with you anymore."

"We've managed to get along without you, Han, and yes, they do know what they're doing. They told me all about it and it sounds like one of your wild schemes, and they always worked," Luke said proudly.

"Okay," remarked Han after a moment's thought. He glanced at the clouds overhead, darkening more as the men talked. "Look, I've gotta get going or I'll be late for my deal." Han stepped forward and gave Luke a big bear hug, then said after releasing him, "Take care, kid."

"Promise," Skywalker replied. Han watched as Luke scurried across the bay, trying in vain to get to the perimeter wall before a wind blew sand at him.



Han turned his gaze to Chewie once Luke was gone from sight. "Come on, chum, we've got ourselves some business to take care of."

The Wookiee moaned lowly, shook his head, and went back up the ramp into the ship, supplying the answer to Han's question before he asked it. Han stood there a moment, hands on hips, deciding on his course of action. "Ok then," he shouted at his co-pilot. "If you aren't gonna come, don't. I'll do it all myself. Take all the credit too." He waited for a caustic remark from the Wookiee but none was forthcoming. *Must be feelin' lower than he looks,* thought Han. He pulled his black jacket closer around his neck, then headed off in the direction Luke had taken only moments earlier.

* * * *

Han nestled himself more comfortably into the plush, stuffed leather chair, propping his feet up on the stool before him. He ran his hand smoothly across the brown leather arm, thinking ot himself how fantastic it was to have an honest job. If he'd known that this was what it meant, he would have dumped smuggling and its problems long ago.

The entire room, large in size, reflected money. Rich and comfortable was what it said. The man behind the desk, an Uhiot by race, ran the corporation for which Han was now concluding a deal. Rrote Luik's body was attired in the proper businessman's dress, nothing gaudy or flashy; it reflected that this man was a businessman and could be construed for nothing else. Short black hair covered his scalp, matching his dark suit perfectly, and his light blue eyes were complimented by the sky blue silk shirt he wore beneath the suit. Han didn't quite match the room, being as he was clad in jackboots, pants and dark jacket -- all casual. And the blaster, unfortunately, said that he must get into trouble from time to time. But, this man had been recommended to Rrote by a good acquaintance and he did need a cargo shipped on the double.

Han was still surveying the room as Luik proceeded to go through his large Fealwood desk, a quite expensive, ornate piece of furniture. Han mused that in the majority of his past transactions, he'd never once sat in an office such as this one, in a chair like the one he was presently in. Why, half the time there was no place to sit at all. It was a warehouse, or else the man's 'business office' would be the dark secluded corner of one of the less reputable bars. *Boy, Chewie sure is missin' out,* Han laughed silently.

"Captain Solo," spoke up Luik, his voice thick with the Uhiotian accent that made him slightly hard to understand, so he spoke slowly and concisely for Han's consideration. "This is the contract," he said, holding some papers before him. "You may take your time reading them, and if it is agreeable to you, you may sign here, then we can proceed with the actual shipping." He offered the papers to Han.

The Corellian scanned over the fourteen-page document, aghast at the legal wordage he found on the papers, and such *fine* print! He'd better read it over,- just to make sure he wasn't getting stuck for anything. After half an hour, he nodded his head affirmatively, then took the stylus from Luik's hand and scrawled his name across the line designated. He really wasn't sure what he'd signed, but he didn't see anything in the contract about his person getting blown away for dumping cargo.

"Got yourself a deal, Luik," said Han confidently. Then he added hastily, "Mr. Luik."

"Excellent, Captain Solo." Luik stood from behind the desk and Han rose also. "If you'll follow me, I'll show you where the cargo is."

"Fine," remarked Han.

* * * *

The Uhiot and his newly contracted freighter pilot headed down toward the warehouse level of the gigantic comples where all the cargo was stored. As they descended deeper into the building, walking more and more corridors, Luik seemed to become more out of places as the walls reflected less money and more austerity. At the same time, Han seemed to fit in a bit better, though the lethal blaster strapped to his thigh still singled him out from the others.

After passing a myriad of doors and entrances, they arrived at their destination. They both entered a small storeroom, small by comparison to some of the more massive ones housed in the same structure, to see rows of small selmetal cages. A yellow light was cast about the room from the rows of light fixtures in the high ceiling, and all in the room took on a sickly green pallor from it. The workman down at the end of one of the rows of cages looked up from his bill of lading to see the two enter. He attached the stylus to the board then approached.

"Mr. Luik, sir," he greeted.

"Yancy," acknowledged Luik. "This is the pilot who is going to ship the cargo. Captain Solo," he introduced. Han shook hands with the man in the drab red jumpsuit, then smiled superficially. Obviously Yancy took a dim view of Han as soon as he saw the blaster.

Yancy brought his attention back to his superior. "Sir, everything is in order, all set for shipment. If you'll just tell me where we should load ... "

"We'll use Boy 17," decided Luik. "Yes. Captain, you may bring your ship into Boy 17 on the south sector of the landing field. Upon your arrival, we shall load the shipment."

"Sure," replied Han.

* * * *

Luik finally answered the persistant buzzing of his deskbound comlink. "Yes, what is it?" he asked, slightly annoyed at being interrupted in the middle of reading his annual report on the growing financial status of his enterprise.

"It's Yancy, sir. I think you should take a look at what just landed in Bay 17, sir," came an unsteady voice.

"Well, all right," sesponded Luik, aggravated. "Just hold on." Rrote rose from his comfortable chair, strode over to the massive Fealwood shelves which covered three-quarters of the walls in his office, and removed some fine Pervian macrobinoculars from a shelf. He walked over to the window, set the binoculars on their automatic mode, then looked out.

"Oh, my dear ... " his voice trailed off in both awe and shock. He put the binocs back on the shelf and came over to his desk. Depressing the comlink button, he said, "Yes, Yancy, I'll be down there in one minute!"

It took three minutes, but Luik did arrive. He disembarked from his personal company speeder as gracefully as he couuld considering the state of shock he was in. What was that awful dilapidated thing doing on his field? It couldn't possibly be the *Millennium Falcon*! Captain Solo had specifically stated, and his acquaintance had told him, that the *Falcon* was indeed one of the fastest ships around. *That* ... ? No, of course not, it must be someone else mistakenly landing here, thinking this field was someone else's, but oh, oh, no ....

Han walked down the ramp of his ship, then strode over to where Luik and Yancy were standing, both seeming to support each other as they stared at the ship. "Hi, Mr. Luik. Ready to load," said Han happily.

"Load?" came a querelous voice from Yancy.

Han saw the expressions on both their faces, despondant, horrified, then saw what gave them cause to be in such a state-- his ship. *I thought they knew what they were signing for,* he mused. He began his standard introduction phrase. "She may not look like much, but she's got it where it counts ... " Then he decided that the rest would not be appropriate for the present company.

"You do say?" muttered Luik, barely understandable. He snapped out of his daze, then regarded the pilot. "It looks rather ... well ... apart."

Han saw a difficulty forming. "As I said, she may not look like much, but that's just on the outside. She's one of the fastest ships around and will get your cargo there long before your routine carriers do. She's perfectly safe. Oh, don't mind those black marks," he added noting Luik's horrified expression at spotting the scorch mark on the hull. "Had a little trouble with some pirates once but I got clean away -- with my cargo intact." It was hardly wise to tel him that the pirates were Imperials, and the cargo was spice.

After a few minutes of Han's very convincing charm and strategic talk, Luik folded and told Yancy to load the cargo. Chewbacca came out at all the noise and Luik took a step back at the mere sight of the creature, which grew taller as it got closer.

"Mr. Luik, this is Chewbacca, my co-pilot," introduced Han. "Best one there is."

Chewie greeted him with an enthusiastic growl, as Han had said to be on best behavior with these corporate types. Luik just nodded his head tentatively and squeeked out an acknowledgement.

"Chewie, why don't you show Yancy where to load the stuff."

The Wookiee nodded and departed. But after about ten minutes, the loading process already in progress, the Wookiee lumbered back, a puzzled expression in his eyes, and voice his opinion to Han.

"Yeah, lizards, Well, they're clean, aren't they?" Chewie growled another remark. "Who cares?" shot back Han, looking around to make sure Luik wasn't in earshot. "It's a clean cargo, whether literal or not, and the pay is eight thousand credits, with another two thousand if we get there before a certain deadline. And with the *Falcon*, well, we've got it made, pal. Perfect!"

Chewbacca shook his head as he went back to supervise Yancy. It just seemed too easy, too honest. Something had to go wrong. All that money and no risk? The Wookiee glanced skyward and sighed.

* * * *

Mauna was a world that stayed very faithful to the turn of her seasons. When the large planet assumed the correct position away from its large sun, the biological processes of the planet followed suit. It was now fall, and fall things did. The leaves of the many trees turned bright yellow, vivid crimson, soft brown, and detached from the branches of the tall trees and covered the ground, buildings and everything.

Street cleaning crews were constantly going through the hundreds of paved streets, cleaning up the leaves so speeders would not blow them through open windows, into peoples' faces, businesses, etc. The unpaved streets of the lower sections of town were left covered with the beautiful foliage; it would do no good to stir up both leaves and dirt, so the city sanitation department decided to let nature take its course and blow the leaves away with strong winds.

At Mentahol's Docking Port, three rather unsavory looking beings stood loitering around one of the boys. They watched with unusual interest, and some trepidation, as the Corellian freighter landed, sitrring the multitude of leaves into wild clouds. As the foliage settled back down to the ground, the ship and the three beings, the men began talking among themselves.

"*That* can't be it, can it?" asked one hesitantly.

"Sorry to say that *that* is it."

The other two glanced worriedly at their commander, then back to the ship. Unfortunately, Bain was correct. The numbers on the hull matched the ones they'd been told.

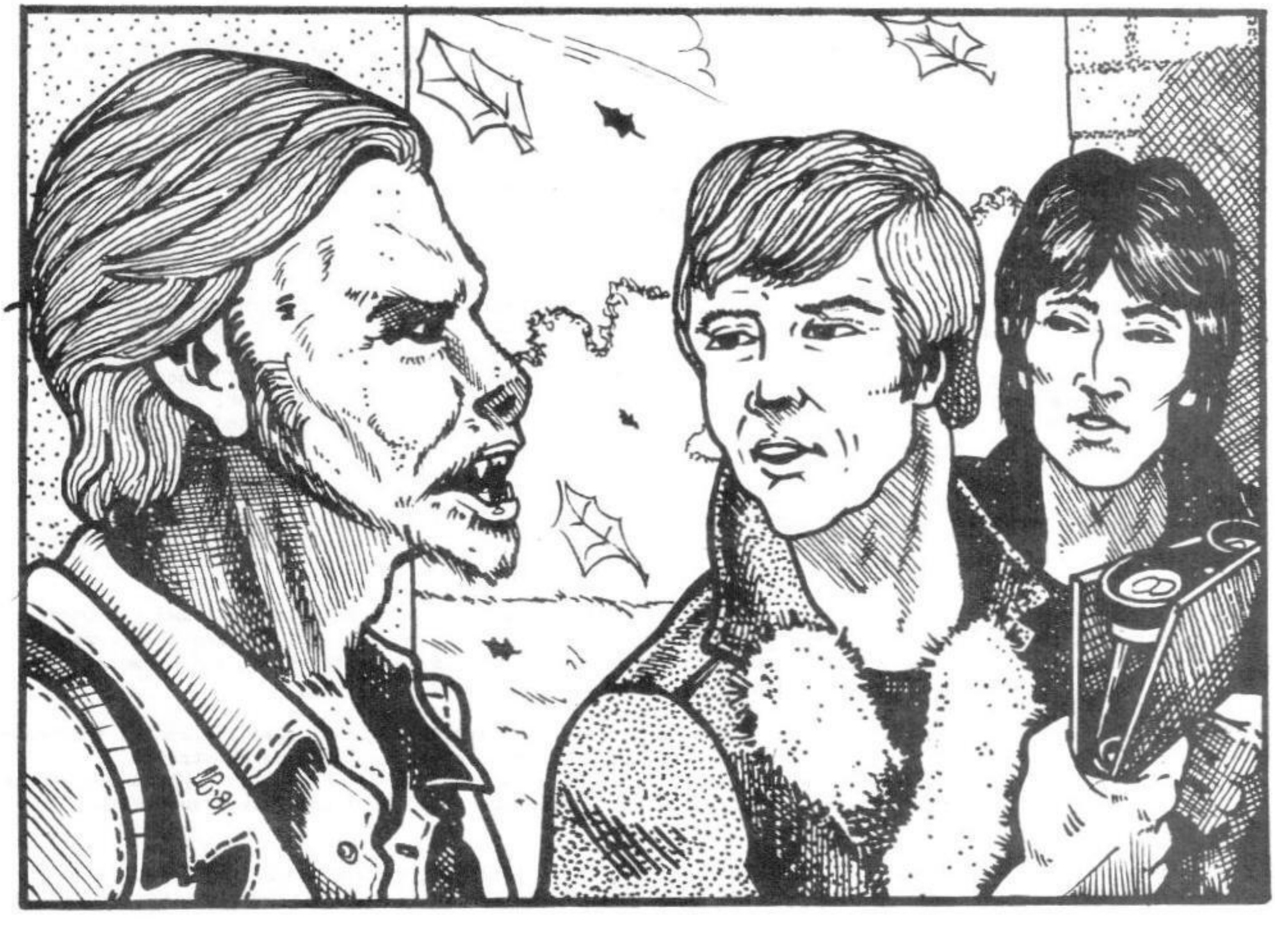
Bain, the tallest in the group, but only by an inch, studdied the ship carefully. His underlings tended to call him 'average' on more than one occasion, as he looked like so many other humanoids, had no really distinctive facial features, and could actually be called average -- which was one reason the authorities had never caught him. They could never get an accurate description of him. Bain finally put down the binoculars, handing them to Suze Tek-penski, his so-called second-in-command. Suze reholstered the binoculars in their leather case belted to his hip.

"It certainly does look like it will be easy to gain entrance to," remarked Bain.

"You always say that," spoke up the third member of the party, Frass, in a high-pitched voice. Bain shot a quick glance at the being, then back at the ship.

"Be quiet, Fracas," he ordered.

"Stop calling me that!" complained Frass quickly and hotly. He then quieted down, picking at his claws. Even though at a quick glance he looked humanoid, he was of the Utchon race, very close in bloodlines to the Uhiotan race with which Han had just dealt , except at one point in evolution they had followed along a completely different lineage. His facial structure showed the subtle resemblance of his canine ancestry, and a very light layer of fur covered his entire body in a soft tawny color. Though his hands did resemble hands, they were more like claws; they were extremely strong and the nails did not break off as with humanoids, but just occasionally shedded layers. And also, he possessed very sharp teeth, characteristic of his species, with two fang-like canine teeth. With these very effective weapons, he could win the majority of the fights he managed to get himself into. He had a minimum of a half hour's story for each scar he had on his person. And for all the fights he kept getting into, over the stupidest, most meaningless trivia, Bain had nicknamed him Fracas , much to Frass' chagrin. But if ever the opportunity came up in which to employ brute strength, Frass was their man -- uh, Utchon.



"Pssst!" uttered Suze. "Look!" he pointed.

All eyes watched the ship. The ramp had come down, the hatch opened, and two beings exited the ship and stood down at the bottom of the ramp, looking around.

"I think we ought to dump the idea of jumping them straight out," commented Frass. "Look at that thing! It's huge! And that human is carrying a blaster and from the looks of him he's willing to use it."

"We aren't going to jump them; when did I ever say we would?" remarked Bain as he studied the smugglers. "I honestly can't see the reason the Waylett Corporation hired them to ship their stuff. It's hardly corporate freighter style."

"They needed the stuff here fast," supplied Suze, the researcher of the group.

"Well, we'll just make ourselves invisible until those two leave then we'll see about getting in."

The three of them sauntered off down to the exit and loitered around outside at a nearby bar. From the window seat they'd managed to obtain, they could they could watch the entrance the pilots were likely to use. Then they could get to work.

After a short while they saw Han and Chewbacca leave, walking off down the street, engaged in conversation.

Upon arriving at the *Falcon*, looking as inconspicuous as possible for a group of soon-to-be criminals, Suze immediately set out trying to break the lock, but found that whoever owned the ship did not want anyone entering and had taken more than adequate precautions. After a while,Suze quit, voicing his opinion that this idea was deffinately out of the question. Frass then suggested they try to find out where the pilots were, survey them from afar, and see what they could find out. But first, insisted Bain, was to find out when the cargo would be due for delivery.

* * * *

Han let the red Jeven brandy slide down his throat as he savored the delicious flavor. Now, this was the life. Chewbacca, at the other side of the table, was enjoying a tall, cool glass of one of his favorite concoctions, his eyes occasionally straying toward the bar counter stocked with countless exotic liquors.

'I still say it's just too easy,' repeated Chewbacca, returning his attention to the drink.

"So it's easy. Don't you think we deserve some 'easy' at last? The last two years have been just about the worst." The Wookiee raised an eyebrow in response. "Okay, not that bad then," corrected Han shortly, "but not the easiest either.

"Still, look at what we've got. A contract for delivering those lizards, though Tev know why they're paying me that much for delivering *those* things. I mean, how much can they be worth each? Lizards??"

Chewbacca shrugged his shoulders. He had never looked into the pet business from any angle in his entire life. The idea of having some small, or large, intellectually limited creature constantly following one's self around, or having to be fed constantly and giving affection only for the prime purpose of being fed, puzzled Chewbacca. A stuffed toy or so for a child he didn't mind, but pets ... any time Han had ever gotten mixed up in shipping live creatures it had always turned into a disaster. Or, if nothing else, sleepless nights. The Wookiee grumbled out a long stream of well-thought out complaints.

Han stared at the Wookiee. "I know they're noisy. Who's the one who had to go down there and check what all the racket was about, huh? Who nearly got his finger snapped off?"

'All right, Han, you don't have to get upset about it,' replied Chewbacca quickly. He finished the rest of his drink, then summoned the waitress to a refill.

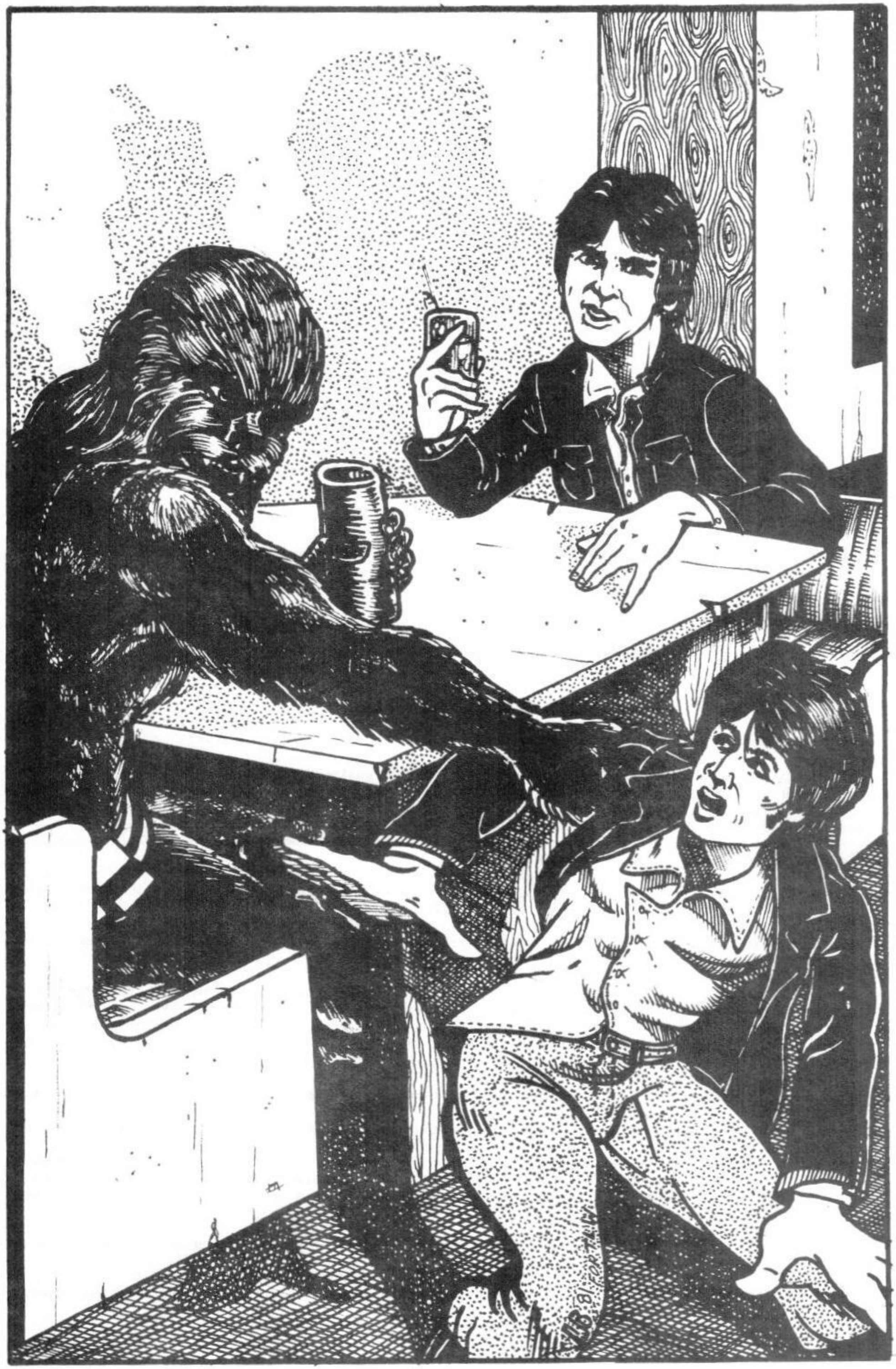
As Han and Chewbacca continued their conversation on the ups and downs of their latest venture, they did not notice the three beings enter the bar and take a seat at a table across the room. All six eyes from the group fell upon Han and Chewie. Frass bent his, slightly pointed,ear toward the the smugglers, straining to hear some of the conversation, but they were too far away and the music which swelled throught the crowded bar was much too loud.

Frass uttered a noise of discontent. "It's no good. I can't hear a word they're saying -- and why bother anyway?"

"To see if we can find out their plans," explained Bain, waving his arm wildly to attract the attention of the barmaid. After having caught it and ordering drinks for all three of them, Bain continued. "I don't know if they know yet, but the office they're delivering to is closed for two days. Today's the first and tomorrow's the second and we need the information before then. So, if we find out where they're going maybe they'll be away from the ship long enough so we can break in. It'll mean damaging the ship, but it's better than trying to jump them, isn't it?"

"Why don't I just walk by with my drink and see what's going on?" suggested Frass, beginning to rise from his seat.

Bain clamped his hand firmly on Frass' leather jacket shoulder and pushed him back into the seat. "No, at least not you. You're much too noticeable and if we bump into them again, they'd recognize you for certain. Suze, go over there and see what you can find out."



Suze nodded, grabbed his drink and swallowed half of it. He then quickly dishevled his clothing, pulled the brown shirt slightly out of the waistband of his dark pants, rolled up one sleeve, and messed his hair, at the same time making sure his intended subjects did not see him do it. He grabbed his glass up in one fist, sloshing a little for practice, then bowed to his companions.

"Gentle...men," he said, just a tiny bit slurred. "I am off."

Bain watched as Suze weaved his way through a group of drunks in one corner of the room and, as he emerged from that group, it appeared he was just a member of the revelers out to get a refill. As he slowly teetered around, bumping into walls and aiming for the bar, his path would bring him directly by Han and Chewie's booth, where he could pick up on some of the conversation. All seemed to be going quite well as the dark haired humanoid strayed toward the booth -- until he arrived there.

Bars were always full of beings in various stages of inebriation and one being in the latter stages of drunkenness barrelled into Suze, then continued on his way totally oblivious to what he had done. Suze was knocked off his, already unsteady balance -- straight into the booth occupied by his targets.

Han looked at the man with icy eyes. He didn't like his conversations being interrupted like this. Chewbacca decided to take the more physical approach and literally wiped the offending drunk off the table. The little man hit the floor with a thud, then the Wookiee wiped the empty glass off the table and it landed on Suze's head, then the floor. The Wookiee grabbed the unfortunate spy by the jacket shoulder, pulling his slightly and uttered a terse warning about where he should walk.

Frass instantly rose from his seat. "A fight!" he sounded, his eyes bright with elation. Bain literally had to yank his underling down by the belt of his pants.

"Can't you stay out of fights, Fracus?" Bain harshly whispered. "And it's not even a fight yet. Stay out of it," he warned.

Frass emitted a low whistling sound between his slightly parted teeth to show his discontent at not being allowed to participate in his favorite pastime.

A minute later, a shaken Tek-penski wandered back to his companions, not having to imitate an unsteady balance any longer, and sat down in his seat.

"Well?" questioned Bain.

"Well, what?" retorted Suze, looking down at his empty glass, which was still clutched in his hand. "I nearly got my neck wrung. I didn't hear a damn thing about where they were going while I was sittin' there making sure I was still alive. Though I did hear one interesting piece of information, very interesting..." he let his voice trail off and then rose, walking back to the bar.

Bain clenched his fists tightly and could feel his blood pressure soaring as he waited impatiently for Suze to return. Frass let out a suppressed howl of laughter watching his superior slowly turn red in the face.

Tek-penski sat down with a half-empty mug of dark Brenti brandy and proceeded to stare at his reflection in the liquid.

"What...interesting piece of information...did you dig up?" Bain managed calmly.

"Remember what Holth told us? Twenty five lizards? Well, the human over there...he says to his partner, five hundred. Now, whatever happened to the laws of mathmatics?" insinuated Suze, lifting the mug to his lips and taking a deep swallow.

"Five hundred?" muttered Bain. "That means..." He stared off at the two smugglers across the room, who were enjoying themselves grandly. "...five to a cage if they have a hundred cages. It'll take all night to find the right one!"

"Now what do we do?" questioned Frass in an intentional whine.

"I don't know," moaned Bain. "This isn't going like it was supposed to. We've got to get that chip tonight, so, well, ... tonight we've got to do something."

"There's nothing better than a plan where it's all we've got," remarked Suse rather haughtily.

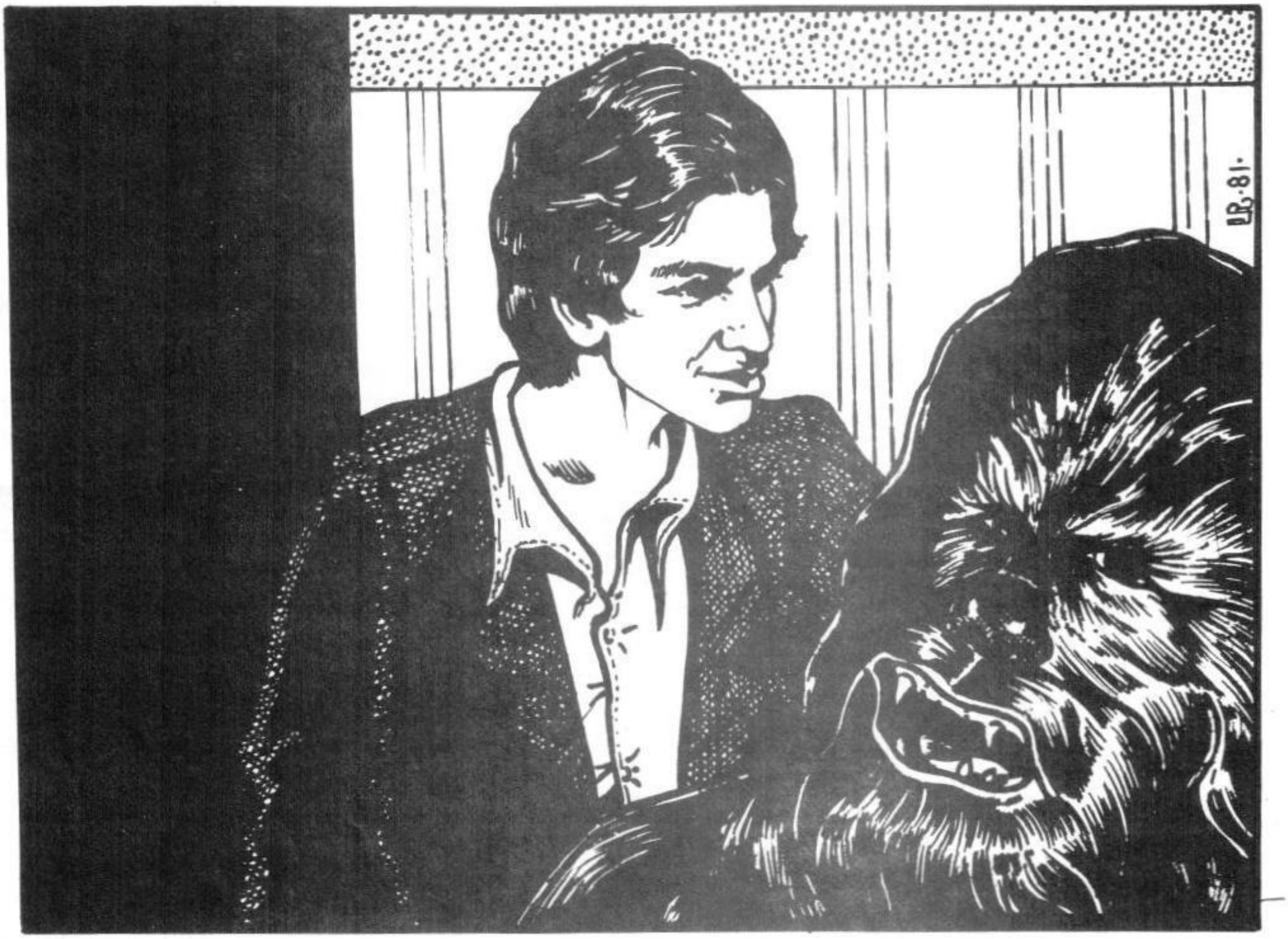
Bain shot an annoyed look at Sue, then glanced at the smuggler again. "They're gone!"

Both Frass and Suze looked at the booth. While they were in the midst of the petty argument, their prey and left the establishment.

* * * *

Han left the receptionist's area of the building holding his temper in as much as he could. As he got outside, he wanted to yell his grievances all over the city, but the streets were full of pedestrians and speeders, not the best place to have a tantrum.

"I just can't *believe* it!" Han stormed, turning a sharp left at the corner, the Wookiee walking along to his right. "Of all the--why didn't Luke say something about the holidays down here?!"



The Wookiee made a non-committal sort of answer, avoiding the sore temptation to tell Han 'I told you so'. *'But at least we're still getting paid the bonus, Han.'*

"Well, the receptionist doesn't know," growled Han, crossing the street without bothering to look. A furry fist grabbed him by the arm and yanked him back onto the sidewalk before a large transport loaded to full capacity with passengers was able to flatten him into the pavement.

'Han, watch where you're going!' scolded Chewbacca instantly. He released his grip on the Corellian's arm as Han made a protest. *'This life of honest living just doesn't agree with you, Han. We should have taken that spice shipment out of Gyre.'*

Han shut his eyes at that remark, then silently counted up to ten. He opened them again and looked up to his co-pilot. "I don't know anymore. No," he decided then, "we both agreed we'd do it. I'm sick of jumping everytime a trooper comes around the corner. And the last mission we took for those rebels--" he glanced around quickly to see that no one had heard him, "--you nearly got yourself blown into a million pieces. No, we'll stick through this. It's just the delay, that's all. Not used to all this red tape."

'Allright,' agreed the Wookiee. They began walking again in no distinct direction until they came to a large traffic circle. *'Now what?'* murmured Chewbacca, watching the transports speed by, pedestrians dodging across the streets to get to the other side.

"I dunno," responded Han unenthusiastically.

'Want to sight-see?' suggested Chewbacca, looking off in the distance toward a towering building.

"Huh?" Han glanced around the street; the variety of stores on just this one corner block alone was amazing. "Sure, why not? Nuthin' else we can do. First, though, let's get cleaned up. No use walkin' around the city reeking of whatever that was that character spilled on us."

'Maybe that's why the receptionist threatened to throw you out,' mused Chewbacca.

* * * *

Frass nudged an elbow hard into the ribs of Bain, who was seated beside him under the alcove in the docking bay where the *Falcon* was berthed. "They're back," he explained.

His companions watched with interest as Solo and Chewbacca traversed the distance from the adjacent entrance to the hatch of their ship.

"Let's jump them," suggested Frass, already rising to his feet. He dusted off the dirt and pulled Suze up by the arm.

"I agree," sounded Bain. Looking around, there was absolutely no one to stop them, the bay being empty save for them and their intended victims. By the time Solo could reach the ramp, they'd be just two feet behind.

The group of three sauntered off at a brisk walk toward the Corellian freighter, talking to themselves to make noise should they be spotted.

"Only ten more yards," whispered Frass encouragingly.

And suddenly, from out of nowhere it seemed, a large group of dock hands came through an opposite exit, using the docking bay as a short cut. The three stopped int their tracks at the sight of eighteen different beings, very rowdy one at that, who were cutting a track straight across their path. By the time the dock workers had passed and were gone from the bay, Han and Chewie were in the *Falcon* and the hatch was shut.

"Come on," complained Bain. "Back to the entrance."

The three went back to the entranceway and began mapping out a new strategy. That plan had been totally shot to pieces by the appearance of those unexpected workers. They suddenly looked up when they saw the hatch door slide up and Solo come out and take a quick glance over the hull of his ship.

"That's not a rust spot, Chewie," Han called inside to his co-pilot. "It's just some dirt."

A short bark back apologized for the remark.

Han was about to go inside when he spied the three beings watching him. They were making absolutely no pretense about not watching him-- they were actually *staring*.

Frass spotted this suspicious look on Han's face and brilliantly reacted by pointing directly at the ship, though not at Han specifically, and letting out a howling laugh. He elbowed Suze and they all followed suit , jostling each other, making snide, rude and various insulting comments about the freighter.

Han glared at them and they waved him off, sauntering off toward the exit, laughing all the way.

Chewbacca came around the corner to find Han standing in one spot in the middle of the corridor looking miserable, staring at the wall.

'What's wrong?'

"There are three jerks outside laughing--laughing at *my* ship," groused Han. "The nerve of 'em," he complained loudly, looking over the interior of the *Falcon* . "It ain't that bad. She's got it where it counts, you know. Point five past light speed."

Chewbacca shook his head and headed toward the cockpit. Looking out the window he saw absolutely no one there. Nothing worse than when Han starts on his 'light speed' speech just because he gets a little miffed. One of those Jeven brandies does it to him every time. He'll just have to keep Han away from them.

The Wookiee sauntered out of the cockpit confidently, ready to tell Han he was seeing things, when he encountered his captain talking to the wall, polishing up on his 'Kessel Run in twelve parsecs' speech. Now was deffinately *not* the time to mention seeing things, what with Han standing there talking to his ship. Why he presisted in telling that rot to some of his customers was beyond Chewie's comprehension. It was totally ridiculous; everyone knew what a parsec was...although on two seperate occasions the customers did *not* admit to much knowledge of distance. Now there they had made some very nice money.

'Han,' interrupted Chewbacca rather loudly, tapping his large foot on the deck surface.

"What?"

Chewbacca opened his mouth, intending to tell Han to keep his selling confined to the bars, especially his 'Kessel Run', but decided against it. Han always got so emotional over those things. Usually he just took insults to his precious ship in stride, but there were times ...

'Han, let's go if we're going,' Chewie said wearily.

* * * *

The sky was now a deep navy blue, giving the appearance of being almost black at this late hour of the night. Cold breezes swept through the docking bays, whipping up the damp leaves and scattering them about.

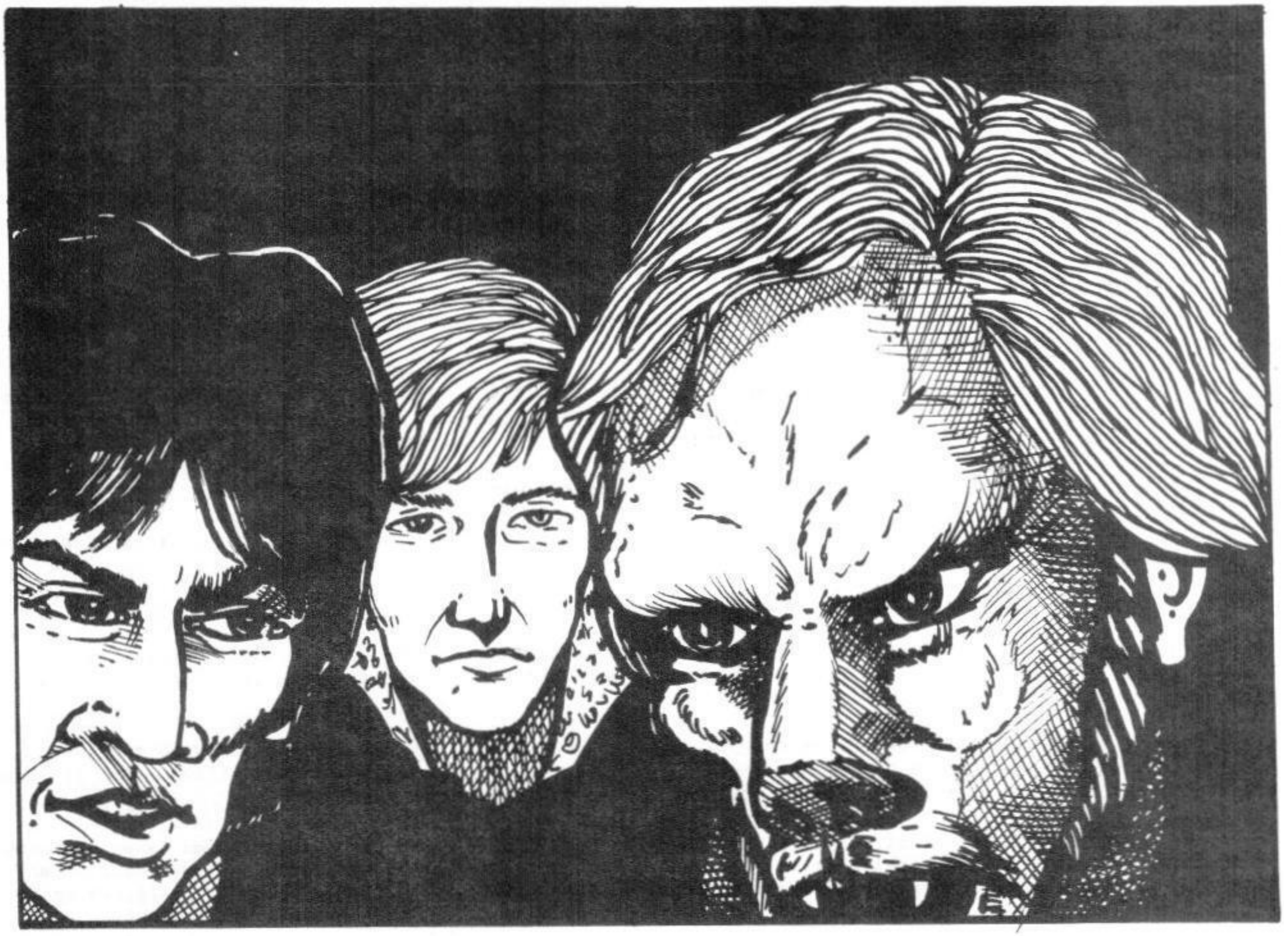
Inside the *Millennium Falcon*, all was quiet. Chewbacca was as still as a fallen tree, deep into a sleep from which nothing could really awaken him, save a disaster, or Han's voice. Han, on the other hand, tossed and turned in a restless sleep, strange dreams going through his mind of the three shadows following him about the city that day, haunting him whereever he went. He was certain that someone had been trailing him, but Chewbacca saw nothing and just put it down to force of habit. The shadows disappeared halfway through their tour of the massive city and when they came back to the *Falcon* all had been fine. But Han's subconscious mind persisted in bringing the nagging subject to his attention while he slept. Those, and the muffled squeaks of varying pitches from the hold below, kept him just on the brink of waking up.

Outside his ship, three beings were very much awake, standing outside in the cold, plotting how to get in to get waht rightly belonged to them. Frass constantly looked around, certain they would get caught by docking bay guards.

"Breaking in won't work," complained Frass again, this third time in the last quarter hour. "Why don't we knock and ask to come in?"

"That's it!" spoke up Suze energetically. "I've got the perfect cover! Follow me!"

* * * *



A persistant, dull thudding rang through his head and even putting the pillow over his head didn't alleviate it. He could still hear the distant, constant banging. Han tossed the pillow across the cabin and sat up halfway, leaning his chin against hishands and looked around. The noise did not stop; it was not a nightmare. It was actually there, somewhwere. Han went through the majority of reasons for the sound, then pinpointed it as someone obviously banging away at the hatch door.

"Dammit all!" he swore. He tossed the sheets away from himself, scattering them on the floor. He grabbed his jeans and thrust them on, threw on his shirt, not caring to tuck it in. Anybody who woke him at this hour of the night didn't deserve the respect of seeing someone respectfully dressed.

Padding out to the corridor in his bare feet, he dragged himself over to the hatch. Leaning his elbow against the door and yawning, he could feel the vibrations through the hull as whoever was on the opposite side continued to pound.

"Who the hell is it?" Han demanded in a nasty tone of voice.

Silence greeted him as the pounding stopped. A moment later a voice sounded through the hull, muffled though it was. "We're from the Tey Distribution Company. We're here about the delivery of the shipment of Otren monitors."

What? *What?!* "Do you know what the hell time it is?!" shot back Han, his voice clearly sounding on the other side. "Come back in the morning."

"Sir," came the irritated voice. "The contract specifically states ..."

"Just wait a second, then," replied Han. "How do I know you're who you say you are? Let's see some identification."

There was total silence for a minute. "Sir, can you see through steel?"

"Shit," Han swore to himself. He came to the cockpit and banged on the window. They came around and stood below, Bain showed his stylus, clipboard, and some small and cetainly, at this distance, unreadable identification. All three people below were clad in what appeared to be drab uniforms of some sort, signifying they were from the same place, if nothing else. Han let out an irritated sigh and went back to the door, then decided he'd better get his blaster. Three against one sleepy, unarmed Corellian didn't seem fair odds to him.

The door opened and Bain and friends were confronted by a man in jeans, a white pullover shirt that was thrown on, and a blaster belt slung casually on the lean hips, one hand fingering the blaster butt with frightening ease.

"Sir ," introduced Bain. "We are here to check the cargo that you are delivering to us." He showed his stolen identification.

Han squinted at them suspiciously. "You weren't open this morning and your receptionist told me you wouldn't be open for another day." The fingers of his right hand unsnapped the restraining strap on the holster with an audible click.

Frass noticed this action and tensed, but Bain spoke quickly before his companion could institute a possible loosing battle. "Yes, well, that's correct. But...but we've been told, instructed through the corporate administrative bureau that we must check on this cargo neverthe less."

"Check for what?" continued Han.

"We have a specific list here," spoke up the quiet Suze, coming out from behind Bain. He brought his clip board up, the many pages fluttering around in the cold breeze that wafted through the open hatch. Han absently rubbed one bare foot against the other, fighting off the cold.

"This, sir, is what we must look for. They must be regulation size, must be in good health, and we must certify this with these forms, and we must examine them all." Suze continued on in an authoritive voice, relying on all the data and forms they had stolen from the distributer's office, along with the clothing.

He continued onward with his lofty speech, but Han was practically ignoring him. Instead he surveyed them all, looked over their identification, and decided that he was being a bit paranoid about the entire situation. After all, he wasn't smuggling spice or anything. This was an honest job. And who in hell would want to steal five hundred lizards?!

"Okay, okay," said Han, motioning with his right hand for Suze to stop his never-ending speech. "This way."

After showing them down to the hold where all the cargo was kept, Han journeyed back up to his quarters where he heard an inquiry from his co-pilot. Han came around the corner and bumped into Chewbacca.

'What is all the noise about?' Chewbacca asked, a blaster in his hand, ready for the worst. Obviously he had not adjusted to the honest life either.

Han looked at the blaster and shook his head. "Nuthin'. Just the company boys comin' to look over their babies. At this time of night, yet. Gotta make sure they're intact or else they won't accept delivery. Shouldn't take too long." explained Han.

'Well, if that's all, wake me tomorrow morning,' decided Chewbacca. He ducked back into his cabin and shut the door.

Half an hour later Han sick and tired of hanging around the passenger bay, having gone through mugs of hot Kleth, decided he's better see what was keeping the three errand boys. Something about them seemed familiar, but he shoved the nagging voice in the back of his mind aside. Just because he was having dreams about shadows haunting him dddn't mean they really existed. Really, Han, he wondered dismally, is this what obeying the law is gonna do to you mind?

On coming down into the hold, he found them in the midst of a quiet conversation in which the word "one" was emphatically spoken louder than anything else. Han sauntered over, all three of them taking instant notice of his unwelcome presence.

"What?" asked Han.

"Oh, uh, well..." Quick, improvise something, thought Bain in panic.

Frass' high-pitched voice broke the silence. "We are just making sure that there is not a *one* among them that is sick, sir. You see, there is this certain disease, uh, Fleshier's Chorea, which does strike this species. You can never be too sure."

"Uh huh," nodded Han, watching them with a distinct lack of interest.

Seconds passed by, which then turned into minutes, and Han thought the sun would rise and set before they would be done with their task. The poke-along speed of their examination was extremely boring to Han, who appeared to be holding up the ship with his shoulders, his arms crossed in front of his chest.

Frass went through his thirtieth cage, He'd lost count of how many lizards he had picked the backs of, when suddenly, can it be? Frass let out his high pitched howling laugh, signifying that he'd found it--but initiated a reaction in Han. He knew that laugh, and now he recognized the three. Those three had been outside earlier mocing his ship--and he wasn't mistaken about being followed earlier. They were not who they said they were.

His eyes betrayed him only momentarily in his recognition, but he didn't catch the fact that Frass had noticed his expression change.

"Well," muttered Han. It wouldn't hurt to get Chewie back up. "When you're done with whatever you're doing, call me." Han turned his back to leave, certain that nothing would happen to him as he'd been in and out of the hold previously a few times and they hadn't done anything yet. But that, unfortunately, was Han's mistake.

Frass took the opportunity to launch his attack. "He's onto us!" shrieked the high voice, and Frass instantly lunged at the Corellian's back.

Han was quick, drawing his blaster in a split second and firing. The bolt went off, but missed all its targets as Frass' thin, but strong body impacted with Han, sending the Corellian sprawling to the deck, the blaster skittering out of his reach. A shower of bits and pieces of Otren monitors rained across the one side of the hold.

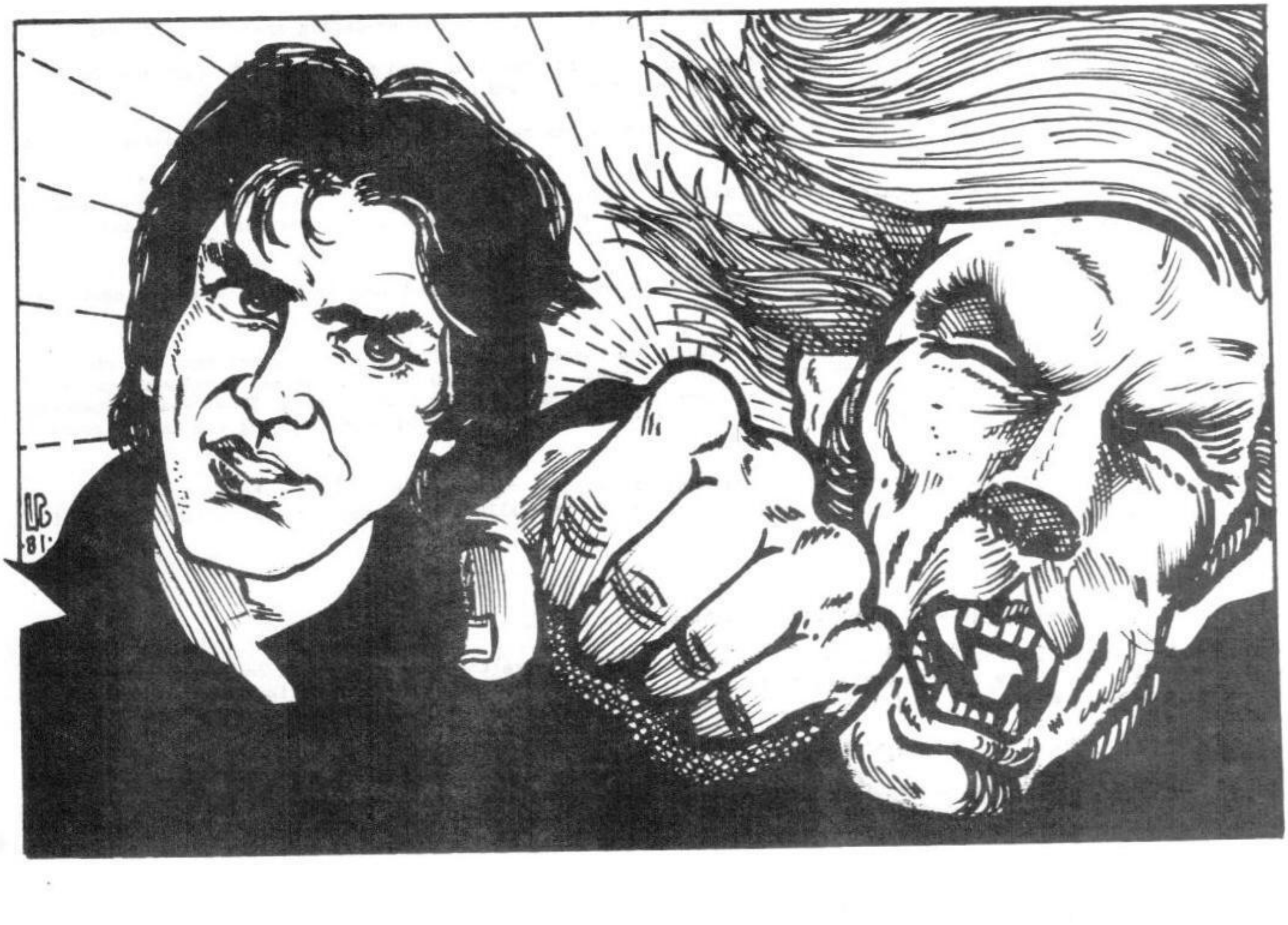
With all the fury of a pack of starving, wild Devanian alley-cats, the other two jumped into the fight. Han let out a cry for help as he was buried under more bodies and that cry turned into an unexpected shriek of pain as he felt one of them bite his arm. Han let loose with a wild kick. Though not as effective without a boot, his foot hit Suze in the chest, sending him flying into a row of cages, resulting in a horrible clattering noise, coupled with the terrified squeals of the occupants of the upset cages.

Chewbacca woke in his cabin at the variety of sounds eminating from the hold and quickly grabbed his blaster.

Han managed a good right to the jaw of Suze, who had come back for more, sending him againt to the deck. Han got to his feet and was about to attack Frass, who headed toward him, teeth visciously bared, when Bain grabbed the Corellian by the shirtback and yanked hard, nearly strangling Han. Han turned around quickly on his heels and blocked a blow that Bain threw, then gave a swift punch to Bain's midsection. Bain crumpled as the breath was knocked out of him, chutching a tatter of Han's shirt that had been torn away.

Quickly, Suze crawled on his hands and knees behind Han. Frass made another attack and Han backed up, tripping over Suze and landing on his back. Before Han could get up to defend himself, or find his loast blaster, Frass and Suze were on him again, throwing wild punches that too often connected with Han's body.

Chewbacca came into the hold, armed with blaster and saw the fight. Suze was thrown from the melee and knocked



into some cages, which clattered down about him. Chewie saw the assailant, aimed his blaster and fired, but Suze got out of the way just in time to save his skin. Five cages exploded in a brilliant fury as more reptiles met their deaths. Their horrified companions squealed even louder, adding more confusion to the situation.

Suze grabbed up Han's blaster and retreated behind the security of a bulkhead. Chewbacca was momentarily confused. He couldn't fire at the others as Han was somewhere in the cluster of scrambling bodies. Suze had disappeared from view and couldn't be seen in the darkness, so Chewie launced an all out frontal attack, screaming at the top of his lungs. It had the proper effect of scaring the wits out of the intruders, who had never seen a Wookiee before. Bain looked up in mortal horror as the Wookiee reached a large paw for him, grabbing him painfully by the shoulder.

A stun bolt from Han's blaster, now in Suze's possession, caught the Wookiee full in the chest. Another bolt then caught him in the shoulder and the massive bulk of Chewbacca collapsed to the floor like a sack of rocks. Bain dropped to the floor, clutching at his bruised shoulder.

Han took advantage of the momentary lack of assailants and threw a wild punch which knocked Frass to the floor, half conscious. Han quickly got to his feet, making a mad dash for Chewie's tossed blaster which was only five feet from him, but two feet away from Suze, who appeared from behind the bulkhead blaster aimed.

The shocked realization on Han's face disappeared as the stun bolt caught him strong in the chest, sending him careening back into another group of cages, which instantly collapsed about him and on top of him. The reptiles squeeked and squealed out their horror into the now deaf ears of Han Solo.

All was quiet on the battlefield. Han was lying unconsious under a pile of a dozen or more open cages, which were rapidly beginning to spew forth their monstrous, angry little contents. Chewbacca was sprawled on his back, totally unconsious from the two stuns.

Frass unsteadily got to his feet, rubbing his very sore jaw, while Suze came forward, hunched over slightly, his arms to his chest. "We get 'em all?" he coughed out weakly.

Bain rose, holding his aching shoulder, tenderly moving it, trying to ascertain whether the terrible vise-like grip had done any permanent damage. He looked around. "Yeah, they're both out. You didn't kill them, did you? There wasn't any reason to."

Suze let Han's blaster clatter to the floor, then knelt beside Han. Checking the one wrist which was sticking up in the air, a lizard crawling down it, Suze sighed. "Don't worry, this one's just fine. Unconscious is about all. And that thing over there looks okay from here."

"Where is it?" spoke up Bain, suddenly worried. "The chip?"

They all looked around, Frass checking through his pockets as he was the last one to have possession of it. Finding it nowhere on his person, he began a frantic search of the deck floor, shoving cages aside haphazardly, until finally, long minutes later, he found it under Chewbacca's foot.

"Got it!" he cried.

Tek-penski sat on the floor, pushing aside some advancing monitors with the blaster butt. "What are we going to do?"

"Huh?" asked Bain.

"All this mess. When these two wake up they're going to see this and wonder what the hell happened here. Since nothing's missing, it's not robbery. And they'll report it to the authorities. And then they won't be looking for a simple case of robbery."

"I see what you mean," "Well, we'll have to make it a robbery. Didn't these two get a partial payment for this shipment?"

Suze nodded his head. "Yeah, I guess it'll be stashed up in the captain's cabin or something. And hey, we do need fare off this planet, don't we?"

"Yeah, our pilot's a no-show," mused Bain. "All right, let's get to work and get the hell out of here."

* * * *

Han awoke, groggy, trying to place where he was. Upon opening his eyes, he saw a wavering figure which soon solidified into that of his co-pilot. And a brief glance around confirmed that the surroundings were definately not that of the *Falcon*.

'Han, you okay? Gave me a start there, I tell you,' said Chewbacca.

Han groaned and tenatively rubbed his face. His line of vision absently strayed down to his hand and he saw a multitude of small red marks on his hand, sprinkled erratically along the wrist and on the arm. He raised his arm toward Chewbacca and made a questioning look.

The Wookiee shuffled his feet uncomfortably. *'Those three who robbed us knocked over the cargo in the fight. The lizards bit you.'*

Han made a miserable noise and fell back on his pillow. Worn to a frazzle by the recent turn of events, sore from all the blows he'd taken in the lost battle, it took him a minute for Chewie's words to sink in.

"Huh? What? Robbed??"

Chewbacca pulled up a chair, made a depressed noise, which matched perfectly with Han's, and sat down. *'They ransacked the entire ship, got the first payment for the cargo, really turned everything upside down. It's a real mess. And to make things worse...'*

"Worse?" groaned Han. "What could be worse?!" asked Han, rising forward. Chewbacca pushed him back down.

'Tomorrow,' said the Wookiee, *'when you're well enough. You lost enough blood with all those things chewing on you. Luckily they had an aversion to fur. And you got a nasty concussion, also. Really, Han,'* the Wookiee commented, *'The way you treat yourself, you're not going to last long.'*

Han ignored the remark totally. "Well, what makes things worse?" he asked, with an eagerness that made him seem like a glutton for punishment. "Tell me it all now, Chewie, so I can die in peace." He turned his head away and made a feeble laugh.

'It's Greyner,' replied Chewbacca. *'Our contact at the Distributers. He wants...'*

At that moment the subject of their just-begun conversation entered the room. He came around to the foot of the bed and glared at Han, a murderous fury in his eyes.

Suddenly that voice that had been yelling at Han inside his head finally screamed loud enough. *You fool! Can't you remember what Brice Litterwar told you ten years ago? That sage piece of wisdom--There is no being worse in all of creation that that of the businessman deprived of his profit.* And now in front of Han was living proof of his old acquaintance's long-forgotten advice.

The man hardly posed a threat in the physical sense, being of a small frame, quite thin and almost comical looking with his sharp, pointed features. Greyner drew in a breath, then began his tirade.

"I want retribution, Solo. Cash, for damages done *my* goods!"

"What? What the hell are you talking about?" demanded Solo.

"The damage you did to my shipment of monitors. There are only three hundred usable left out of the entire shipment. They're the only species that can be used in my company's laboratory experiments. That's money *you owe me*, Solo!"

Han sat upright in the bed, immediatly jolted to his senses by the word 'owe' and how it was applied unfairly to him. "Now, just a minute there, Greyner," Han began caustically.

'Han,' Chewie interrupted quickly. The Corellian managed to direct his stare over to the Wookiee. *'When we were fighting down there, blasters managed to kill about two hundred of them.'*

"The hell I'll pay!" shouted Han, looking directly at Greyner now, ignoring the lethal glance the little man was giving him.

"You owe me, Solo!" spat out the little man. "You were contracted to deliver five hundred and you are minus two hundred. I demand to be paid the exact retail value of each monitor," he hotly demanded.

"What?! Me? Pay you? You've got it all wrong, buddy," Han reasoned out. "You owe *me*. My contract specifically states I get paid."

"Obviously you didn't read the clause in paragraph C, subsection 8.a. *It* specifically states the right for the second party, me," he pointed to himself with an air of exaggerated dignity, "can enact the Camellan statute which says that the tird party, *you*, have to pay for any damage to goods shipped due to negligance on *your* part."

Han's eyes widened in horror. He'd heard of the statute but he hadn't remembered ever seeing it on his contract. "It wasn't on my contract," he growled menacingly.

The little man instantly whipped out an exact duplicate of the contract Han had signed. He thrust it into Han's face and the Corellian grabbed it, instantly turning to the paragraph. It was there, in the smallest print and the most complicated verbage ever to see a written page. And at the bottom of the contract was his name, signed in indelible ink, notarized--perfectly legal in any court. Han tore up the contract in a fit of rage.

"It won't do you any good, Solo. That was just a copy relayed to me by Mr. Luik. He has the original filed away. But don't fret, Captain Solo," he remarked very smoothly. "The money which was to be paid for your services rendered is to be put against the debt you owe me, so..." Greyner took out a small calculator, punched in numbers very quickly, then turned to Han, smiling. "You only owe me 8,000 credits now."

"Hell I do!" Han cried in mortal outrage.

"It's your fault the shipment was damaged and you pay up before you leave or you'll find yourself in jail, whether you're injured or not!" the man responded.

"I ain't payin' you one damn credit!" Han added heatedly to the argument. Chewbacca stood there watching the entire debate, wondering how Han would decide to end it. Chewbacca did not owe a single credit, as it was Han who had absently signed just his name, making himself fully responsible for the entire transaction.

"Oh, you will," repeated Greyner. "You're not going to leave here until you do, or else..."

Suddenly Han looked sick, and he put his hands to his temples, emitted a terrible groan, then fell back to the mattress, seemingly unconscious. Greyner took a step away from the bed, frightened that he may have literally made Solo talk himself to death. One never knew...

Chewbacca checked Han very briefly, took one glance, a terrible if-he-dies-you're-dead glance, at Greyner, then left the room. Five seconds later he was back with a physician. The Wookiee literally tossed Geryner from the room as the healer began examining Han. Chewie moaned very worried questions.

Han instantly 'awoke' and the doctor straightened up, looking shocked.

"I'm just fine, doc," Han remarked. "Just wanted that creep outta here."

The expression on the doctor's face was rapidly changing from that of shock to anger.

"And," Han added, raising a finger to make his point, "if you don't keep him out of here, who knows what sort of condition I'll end up and then you might not get paid. Can't pay my bills if I die on you."

The physician was silent for a moment, then gave a very concise opinion to Han of the wasted time he's just spent, left the room, slamming the door behind him.

Chewbacca sat down, leaning his chair up against the wall, then turned to Han.

"I know, I know. But I couldn't take that first thing when I woke up," said Han. He sank deeper into his pillow. "Do I really owe all *that* money?"

Chewbacca reluctantly nodded his head. *'I checked with the office and it's all, unfortunately, very legal and binding, and if you don't pay up before tomorrow night, you are in very hot water.'*

"Just me?"

'You didn't give the crew any responsibility in the contract, therefore I am totally free of liability.'

Han didn't seem to upset at the prospect of having a jail cell to himself. He didn't think it would be possible to get into any lower spirits than he was at present. "Can't leave the planet to make the money, huh?"

A negative shake of the Wookiee's head supplied the answer.

"Do we have any cash left at all?"

'I went through the entire ship and managed to find six hundred credits the robbers had missed, otherwise, we have none to our names. Except, maybe, that which we have in our accounts, but there is no way to get to them. They will not let me take the ship to get the money. They've impounded it.'

"The *Falcon*?" moaned Han. He pulled the pillow close about his head, wondering what would happen next.

'Han,' the Wookiee spoke up seriously. *'The authorities are involved already and if they start to do any serious digging, they will find warrants out on us. And if they find out anything about our involvement with Luke...'*

"We've got to get out of here," Han decided at once. "Will they let you aboard the ship?"

'Yes, but only if accompanied by a group of armed guards...' The Wookiee's voice trailed off. Han glanced over and saw Chewie's eyes drain of their vibrant blue color as the Wookiee added morosely, *'They will take the ship if you do not pay.'*

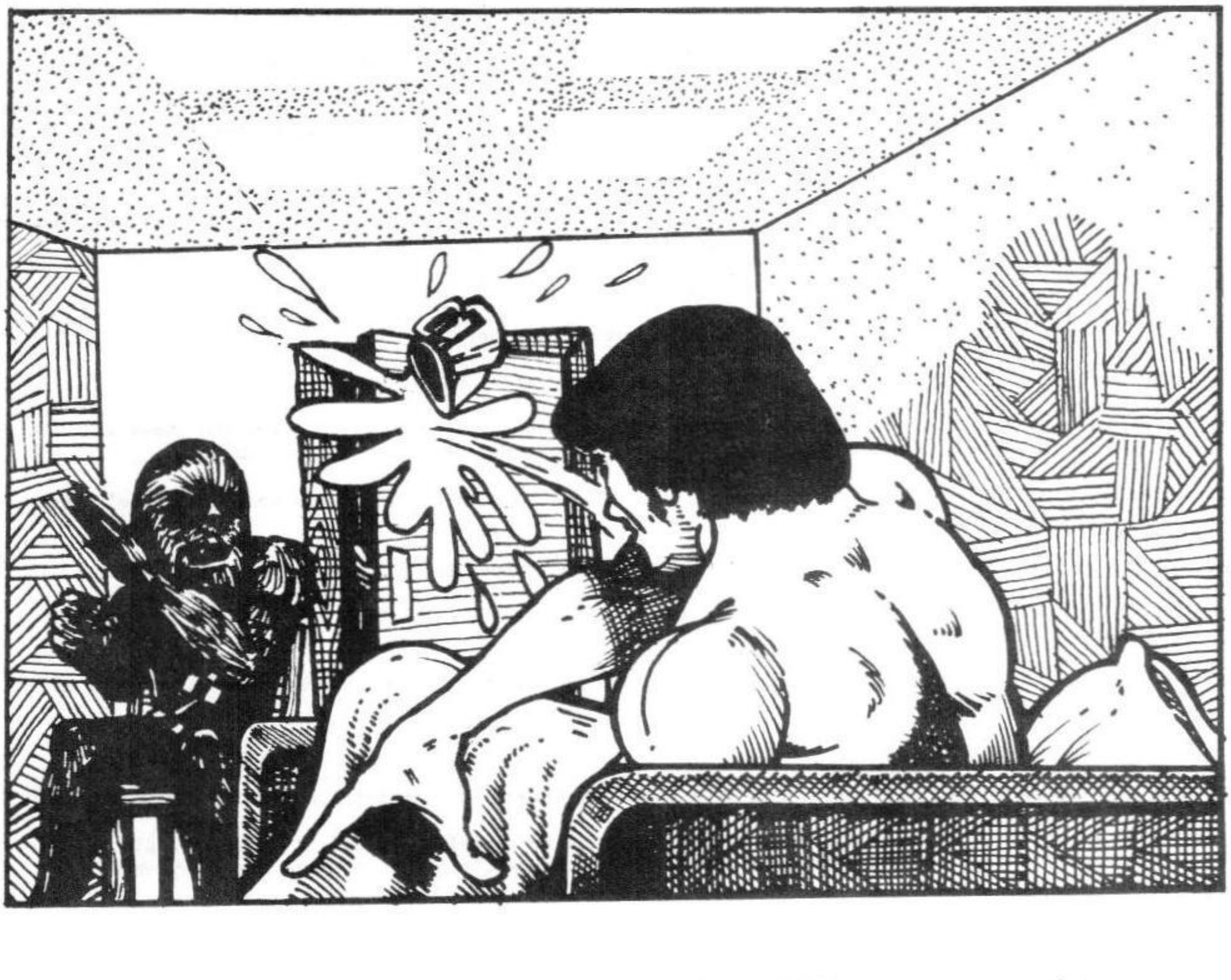
"I should have taken the spice deal," Han muttered. "Worst that could'a happened there is I'd get shot." He then turned his head to Chewie. "Pal, go back to the ship, get all the money you can, see what's sellable aboard ship and come back as fast as you can, huh?"

Chewie nodded his head and left the room, quickening his pace down the long corridor. If they didn't raise the money be the end of the day, the authorities were liable to find out something was wrong, and Han would most likely be handed over to the Imperials, something Chewbacca did not want to see happen.

* * * *

It was sometime later when Chewbacca came back. Upon entering Han's hospital room he found a rather flashily dressed humanoid of unknown origion conversing intently with Han. Han's hazel eyes seemed bright with elation. Obviously something was going right, considered Chewbacca. Han motioned for the Wookiee to take the other chair in the small room, then continued his nearly whispered conversation. The man began motioning, then drew out some papers from a slick black leather pouch. Han took them and began studying them quickly as the man continued to talk.

Han looked up at a question asked him, a quizzical expression on his face, them shook his head negatively. The man



said something louder, but Chewbacca did not catch it. Han shoved the papers back into the man's hands, then said quite loudly, "Get the hell out of here if you don't wanna deal."

The man stuffed the papers back into his pouch quickly, not caring how bent they became in the process. "If that's what you want, that's what you'll get," he sniped at Han quite insultingly, rising from the chair. "See you in jail," he laughed, heading for the door.

"Two-faced snake," Han yelled. "*Parasite*!!" Han grabbed the water pitcher by his bedside and flung it quite viscioulsy at the man, but the annoying person had seen it coming and was out the door immeadiately.

The pitcher hit the door, fell to the floor, and the resulting spray of water from Han violent actions, sprayed the wall, and the Wookiee seated in the chair in from of the wall. Chewie made a small growl between parted lips, carefully wiping the water off himself.

Han glanced over, obviuosly greatly upset, then made some apologetic sounds, "Sorry, Chewie, but shit, can't get anywhere with his type. Lousy bum," he muttered.

'Who was that?' Chewie asked calmly.

"Some ratty lawyer who heard that there was someone in this room with a contract dispute, so he rushed in and gave me a pen and asked me to sign a million papers so he could represent me in my lawsuit. But as soon as he found out what it was all about, he changed his mind. So I threw him out," Han replied, folding his arms across his chest, glaring at the foot of the bed.

'Well, Han, I have looked around, There's nothing we can sell aboard ship except the ship itself. There are a few jobs around that will pay exceedingly high, but it's usually as benefits to the workman's family after he dies in some accident. But, uh, I did see a large variety of gambling houses around...'

"Gambling, huh?" said Han, his eyes widening just a crack, then a sly smile crossed his face. "We got about six hundred, you say? Well, I think we can change that amount, don't you?"

An affirmative growl came as a reply.

At that moment, the door opened and the doctor who Han had previously angered entered, accompanied by what seemed a security guard and some fair-haired, paunchy administrator sort.

"Captain Solo, as you requested, you may leave now, but not before paying."

What more could go wrong? Shouldn't a regiment of armed stormtroopers be coming in about now to practice war games?

"How much?" asked Han flatly.

"In total, two hundred and seventy-nine credits," the administrator responded quickly.

Han clenched his jaw tight and made a disheartening scowl. "Okay, okay."

"We'll be outside," the doctor remarked, then left the room with his little group.

"Get my clothes, Chewie," Han muttered. "I'm gettin' out of this place."

* * * *

Han and Chewbacca had split the remaining three hundred credits between themselves, then went off to different establishments in hopes of raising the needed cash. Unfortunately, no matter where they went, they could not escape the presistant company men who were constantly under foot, insuring that they did not try to escape without paying.

It was near midnight when they two met again on a street corner. The streets were nearly deserted, except for the occasionaly speeder that raced down one of the avenues, taking advantage of sparse traffic to race along at higher-than-permitted speeds.

"Well, chum, how much did you get?" Han asked.

'Not much, five hundred credits. I got wiped out in a Pav-ten game. Things had been going so well,' the Wookiee recollected, *'when suddenly it was all gone, all seven thousand.'*

Han slumped against a street sign, depressed by his partner;s lack of success. "I made two thousand, total. I had to get out of there before I got blasted. Got accused of cheating, yet! Chewie, what in the name of heavens did I ever do to deserve this?"

The Wookiee seemed somber for a moment, then remarked, *'You decided to go honest?'*

Han just moaned. Looking off across the street, he saw the parasitical company man, who was rather out of breath from keeping up with Han, loitering at a store entrance.

"Hey! You!" Han called out.

The man stiffened and looked around nervously.

"We'll be back at the ship," Han remarked. "Just in case you loose us." He turned to his co-pilot. "Come on, let's get some sleep."

* * * *

The two smugglers decided there was absolutely no rush to get back to the ship, as when they arrived, there would just be the usual armed guards waiting for them. And Han had begun to worry in the last hour that there might be more than just guards there. It had been a while since the incident in the hold and he hoped Greyner would not involve the Imperials in this fracus.

Han's forward momentum was halted as a large pay tugged on his jacket collar. Han backed up to the Wookiee. "What is it now?" he asked sourly.

Chewie pointed to a bay which they had been in the process of passing. Gesturing at a solitary being walking along, Chewbacca remarked, *'Doesn't he look familiar to you?'*

"Who?"

'Him.'

Han backed up another step and saw who the Wookiee was speaking about. And, yes, that human did look familiar. Awful familiar, in fact. Han tapped his foot, concentrating on where he had seen that face before.

'One of Luke's friends,' the Wookiee spoke up quickly.

"Yeah, that's it." agreed Han. "Say, you think he's got some money he could loan us?" The Wookiee shrugged. "Might was well check him out."

* * * *

Wedge Antilles looked over his shoulder at the sound of someone approaching. Two figures appeared out of the shadows of an entrance to the docking bay where his ship was berthed. One of them waved a hand. Wedge was not certain what was going on. Nobody knew he was here except his contacts, and they had already found another way off planet before Wedge could even pick them up. He hesitantly backed away, wondering if he could make it to his ship.

"Hey!" Han called out, noticing the man's movements away from him. "Wait!"

Wedge turned on his heels and began a mad sprint for his ship's door. Han took pursuit, followed by the Wookiee, and soon both humans were on the ground, a cloud of dust rising from the fight until Chewie broke it up by pulling Wedge out of the melee.

A horrified expression greeted Han as Chewbacca disarmed the rebel. It was only after a brief moment that Wedge recognized the smugglers. "Solo?"

"Yeah, uh, that's me," Han smiled. He thought briefly. "Wedge, ain't it?"

"Yeah, yeah," Wedge replied, out of breath. The Wookiee put him back onto his feet. "You always attack people in docking bays?"

"You always run?" countered Han. "Well, never mind. You got any loose cash on you?"

"Uh," muttered Wedge, searching through his pockets. "About fifty credits?"

"Nah, I'm looing more for eight thousand," Han sighed.

"Eight thousand?!" exclaimed Wedge. "What do you think I am, a treasurey?!"

Han just looked to the Wookiee and shrugged his shoulders. "So much for that."

"Hey," Wedge said, in a lower concerned voice. "Who's that over there? He with you?"

Han glanced over his shoulder and saw the object of Wedge's apprehension. The company man was standing in the shadows of the docking bay, obviously writing something down. In another second the man who had been following Chewie showed up.

"Geez, can't they leave me alone?" cursed Han. He turned around, glaring harshly at them, and shouted, "I'm working on it! I'm working on it! Now buzz off!"

The two men in the distance jumped at the voice, then disappeared back into the dark grey shadows, but, undoubtably, they were still there.

"Just my creditors," muttered Han.

"Sorry I can't help you, Solo," replied Wedge. "But I've got to get back to base." He began walking up the ramp. He didn't want involvement in any of Solo's ventures.

Chewbacca growled something, pointing a thumb over his shoulder at the small craft.

"Eight or nine you think, huh?" responded Han, cocking his eyebrows in deliberate thought. It just *might* work. "Hey, Wedge. This your ship?"

Antilles turned around for a moment. "Yeah."

Han waved a friendly hand, beckoning Wedge. "Hey, come on down here. I got a question for you."

* * * *

Han slapped the credits down on the expensive desk top with a force that threatened to knock off all loose objects. Greyner's eyes expanded in indignity at the angry person before him.

"Here's your eight thousand. Now give me my receipt and I'll get out of your life," demanded Han betwwen clenched teeth.

Greyner carefully picked up the credits, then handed them over to his accoutant, who proceeded to meticulously count them all, then checked them for authenticity. Never could be too sure when dealing with pilots like these...

The entire process was extremely gratin on Han's nerves, but not as much as on Wedge's. The poor man had been convinced, no, he'd been outright robbed by the Corellian. How was he going to explain to Luke that Han Solo had sold his ship to pay off the Corellian's debt?!

"Very well, Captain Solo," remarked Greyner, nodding in acknowledgement at his accountant's approval of the payment, "You may leave now."

"Hey," snapped Han. "*My receipt*. I don't want you stickin' me for something I don't owe." He held out his hand impatiently, resting the other one upon his blaster.

Greyner avoided Han's piercing glare, instead he looked up to his accountant. The accountant handed over a signed receipt to Han, who snatched it away. Reading it over to make sure it had the proper amount as to what he'd paid them, he smiled at the man.

"Well, don't bother calling me again for your runs."

"Don't worry, Captain," Greyner replied haughtily. "We *won't*."

Han left the room without further comment, glad to be rid of his dealings with Greyner, Luik, and their type. Chewbacca followed alongside the Corellian as he marched down the corridor. Wedge ran up behind the Corellian.

"Hey, Solo," demanded Wedge. "I've got to get back to base."

"So?" responded Han.

"So? For crying--Solo," he began, trying to contain his temper. "That was *my* ship you sold to pay off your lousy mistake! And, and where's the rest of the money? You got eleven for my ship, *remember*?"

Han stopped in his tracks. "So we did. Well, Wedge, old friend," he began smoothly. "Tell you what. We'll give you a ride back home, okay? And the rest of the money can go to me to pay for your passage."

Wedge knew undoubtably he was getting the raw end of the deal no matter how one looked at it. It was he who was out of the money. Aolo and the Wookiee picked up the pace again while Wedge stood by himself, comtemplating what he should do. Han turned around as Wedge ran up being him.

"Okay, Solo, I'll take your ride," he conceded. "But you're going to have to explain this to the Commander."

"And who's that this time?" murmured Han.

"Luke."

As they left the building, Han remarked, "Well, the kid'll understand, won't he, Chewie?"

* * * *

"We'll be there in a couple of minutes," Han commented.

The Corellian was seated at the console in the passenger bay, going over his financial losses in his mind. No matter how he looked at it, he did not make a single credit. The time lost, the money lost from thieves, hospital bills, selling Wedge's ship...

And, meanwhile, Wedge was sitting at the chess table, chin in his hand, looking as dejected and miserable as he could. He couldn't figure out why his contacts had left like that. He'd only been a half a day late. He couldn't help if he's had problems with the ship. Oh, what an undependable lot those men were. Who knew where the chip could be at present. Hopefully back at base. And now he had to come back as a passenger, having let the smooth-talking Corellian con him out of his ship. No, it wasn't his ship--it was the rebellion's ship. And they needed ships badly. No matter, once Luke heard about this, General Dodonna would also hear, and then the Corellian would be in trouble. Wedge leaned back in his seat, satisfied with his reasoning.

"Hey."

Han looked up from the console to see Wedge staring at him. "What now, Wedge?"

"You never did explain what happened to you."

"Got robbed. Three lousy bastards jumped me in my own ship, destroyed half my cargo, did this to me," he explained, pointing to the numerous bruises and red puncture marks which covered much of his person. "Then Greyner threatens to toss me into detention for the rest of my life for reneging on my contract." He looked over to the Wookiee, who was seated opposite Wedge. "Just over a bunch of stupid lizards."

"Lizards?" questioned Wedge. oh, no, it couldn't be...

"Yeah, lizards. Five hundred of the noisy beasts. All that sleep lost, money shot to hell, and what for? Nothing," complained Han tersely.

Wedge made a low whistle and slumped down into his seat. Oh boy, were things going to get sticky. He knew Bain and his comrades were supposed to get the chip off a cargo full of lizards. That much he did know. And those three were always doing things the complicated way. And since Solo had said 'three' had jumped him, and lizards... Wedge decided then and there that when the *Falcon* landed, he would retreat as far away as possible from Han Solo, because Bain and his men were probably back at base, and if Solo just happened to bump into them...

* * * *

After being cleared for landing, the *Falcon* settled down into a docking bay, one it had used numerous times in its services to the Alliance. As soon as the hatch opened, Wedge bid a hasty farewell and ran for the nearest exit.

Han came down the ramp slwoly, expecting to meet a representative of the rebellion, but he saw not one living soul in sight. He leaned against the large bulk of the Wookiee when Chewie came down the ramp to stand beside him.

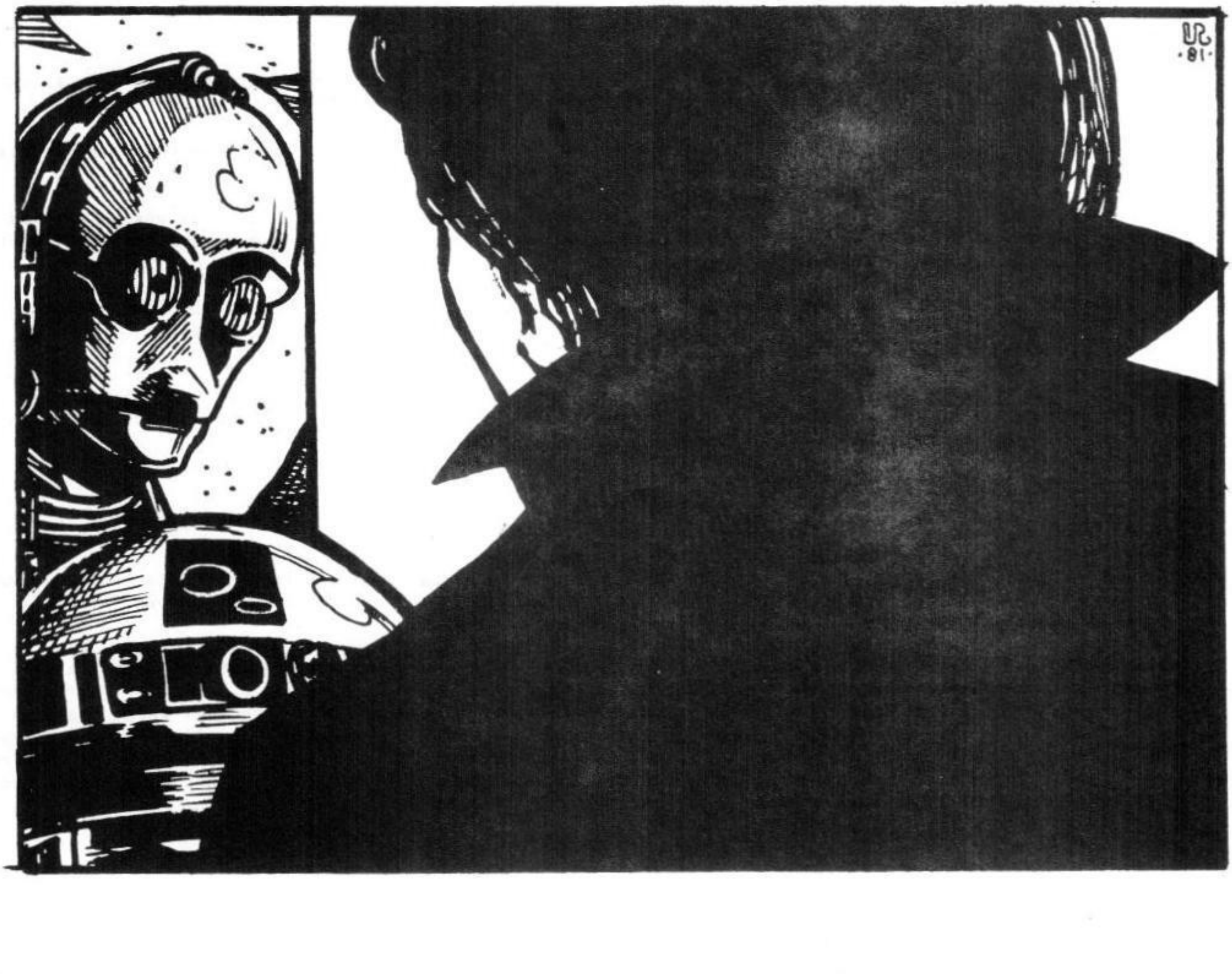
"I'm glad to see everybody's so happy I'm back," remarked Han dismally.

Chewbacca grunted, then pointed. Han saw the droid, Threepio, ambling over from one of the entrances, heading in a straight path for the *Falcon*.

"*This* is the welcoming committee?" Han assumed with a complete lack of enthusiasm.

The droid came up to the smugglers, then began gesturing with his arms in the usual exaggerated manner of his character. "Oh, Captain Solo, it is so nice to have you back," the droid began in an energetic voice.

"Yeah, yeah," commented Han, hoping to cut the converstation down to a minimum. "Where's Luke?"



"Oh, Master Luke sent me to come fetch you, sir. If you'll just follow me."

* * * *

See-Threepio and his two guests intercepted Luke Skywalker coming down a corridor. Han had to grab the youth by a sleeve in order to stop him as Luke seemed oblivious to all around him, intent on getting to some destination in a hurry.

"Slow down, Luke," ordered Han.

"Hey, Han!" shouted Luke ahppily. He cuffed the Corellian on the arm. "When did you get back? Oh yeah, well... how was...business?" The voice trailed off as Luke got a good look at the bruises.

"Business got shot to hell," explained Han briefly.

"Imperials?" asked Luke seriously, as they walked along.

"No, businessmen."

Chewbacca nodded his head and gave his opinion of businessmen in a loud exclamation which, fortunately, Luke could not decipher. Threepio deemed it best for him to detach himself from the group and he did so with haste.

"Well, hey," spoke up Luke, happier now that he saw Han wasn't seriously damaged, except for his pride. "Boy, these missions are getting rather dangerous."

"You don't say," remarked Han, recalling how 'easy' they were in Luke's opinion only days before.

"Yeah," answered Luke. "Some of our operatives had to smuggle a chip off a planet, couldn't do it themselves, so they stuck it in the cargo of some unsuspecting pilot. Then the other operatives had a devil of a time getting the chip out of the cargo. Turned into a real brawl."

They turned the corner, only about twenty yards from Luke's destination, a door down on the left side.

"Yeah, I know what they're like. Three creeps mugged me in my own ship," griped Han for the umteenth time.

"Oh, sorry about that, Han," said Luke. "You want to meet the guys who did the smuggling? Maybe you could give them some tips so they'll do a better job the next time 'round?"

"Sure, why not. How dangerous can explaining the principles of smuggling be?" mused Han.

"They're right through here," Luke said, indicating the door he was about to open.

"Boy, and to think I got into all this mess over a cargo of lizards," thought Han aloud.

Luke opened the door and he and the two smugglers entered the room. It was only a second, but just a second too late, that Luke connected what Han said about being mugged by three men and the fact that Bain and his men were 'three' men and they had assaulted a human and 'some large furry thing' in a freighter.

Han froze in his tracks as soon as he came in. Seated at the table in the small room were Frass, Bain and Tekpenski, who were just chatting small talk until they looked up. Here were the three beings whom Han had threatened to throttle, dismember, and blast into a million pieces, amoung other things, seated before him.

"You!" he shouted in anger, pointing an accusing finger toward them all, the fury in his eyes more than evident.

The last thing Luke could recall clearly was Frass screaching at the top of his lungs, "Fight!", lunging over the table and colliding head-on with Han, who was halfway over the table himself. There was the roar of the Wookiee, and Bain and Suze joined the fight, and Luke tried to break it up. Then he got trampled under the whole lot of them.

* * * *

All was rather grim in the conference room. Dodonna had called this meeting in order to prevent possible homicides from occurring on his base.

Suze, Frass, and Bain were all seated together at one table at the other end of the room, looking quite battered. In this fight the odds had been against them, as the Wookiee had actively and violently participated. Frass would not punch out another being for at least six weeks, both hands having been broken against a wall, while Bain would be hobbling around on crutches for the same amount of thime. Suze was just an unappealing shade of black and blue over the majority of his body.

At the table to the left of theirs, Luke Skywalker and Wedge Antilles sat. Wedge spent his time staring at his hands folded in front of him atop the table. He really didn't care to explain how the whole mess got started. And Luke looked totally worn out. Even the Force could not have helped him in that brawl. It had taken over a dozen security guards to pry the combatants apart.

Dodonna and General Willard both sat sternly at the head of another table, which was across from Bain's group. Dodonna had his arms folded in front of himself, waiting patiently for Han to finish his argument.

The Corellian was pacing back and forth between all the tables, pointing fingers left and right, raising his voice continually.

"It's all your fault!" he snapped, whirling around on his feet and pointing his bandaged hand toward Wedge, then shifting it slightly to the right at Luke. "You destroyed my cargo!" he continued. "I finally land an honest job and then your types destroy my cargo, steal my money, land me in the hospital, nearly have me thrown into detention!"

"Now, Solo..." began Dodonna, trying in vain to get a word in.

"Oh, shut up!" Han yelled angrily. "Look what your men did to me!" He waved his bandaged arm around. "Bit me! *Bit* me!" he complained virulently, then walked over and pointed an accusing finger toward Frass. "What sort of monsters are you hiring in your rebellion?"

"Han, let me explain," Luke said quietly.

"Oh, explain it," said Han snidely, stomping up to Luke. "You nearly got me killed, you fool! And what about my money? They robbed me!!" he cried with all the indignity he could muster.

"Robbed you?" spoke up Suze. "What about you? You sold Wedge's ship, the rebellion's ship. You're just as much of a thief as we are. Worse."

Han turned on his heels sharply, his eyes glaring a murderous hate as he started to walk toward Bain and his group. It was obvious that he was going to start another fight.

"Solo, don't!" ordered Dodonna sharply. Frass began standing, ready to encourage Han into another brawl. "And you!" Dodonna snapped irritably. "Sit down!!"

Frass sat down and Solo turned away, clenching his one good fist tightly, then began to pace again.

"Well, where's my money?" he demanded. "I want retribution for damages done me! I want cash!"

Where the hell did Han pick up that kind of talk, wondered Luke silently.

The sound of the door to the room opening attracted Han in the middle of his 'I want my money' noise, and he directed his tirade at the poor unfortunate who had just entered.

Leia stepped back a foot as Han screamed at her. "I want my money!" She was totally ignorant of what the meeting was about, only having learned just minutes beforehand that Han was back on base. And all she wanted to do was just say hello.

"What money?" she asked, looking hopelessly to Luke for help.

"The money your operatives stole from me!" Han angrily answered.

Leia looked around the room at all the bandages, the bruises, the sour, unpleasant faces, and realized too late she should have minded her own business and stayed out. All day long she had been in a very pleasant mood, being nicer than usual, and now, suddenly, this Corellian appeared out of now where and started yelling at her.

"Han," said Luke, hoping to catch the smuggler's attention. He did. The Corellian sauntered down four steps to where Luke sat and continued his argument, demanding, for perhaps the seventieth time since the so-called meeting started, to be paid.

This opportunity gave Leia the chance to dash over to Dodonna and ask what had happened. Dodonna explained it very quietly, as the mere sound of a voice would cause Solo to turn his attack toward the speaker.

As Dodonna explained on at length the predicament they found themselves in, Chewbacca entered the room. At first he thought he might not know which room the meeting was being held in, but the demanding, belligerant cries of the outraged Corellian sounded clearly in the corridor. Chewbacca took a seat next to Luke, waved to Han that he was now present, and asked how things were going.

"Han!" caled Leia, interrupting the Corellian in the midst of his telling his co-pilot how 'block-headed' these rebels were.

"Han," she said quieter, and the Corellian walked over. Quiet for once, yet, must be all out of breath from yelling, she thought. "Now, Han. General Dodonna has told me about this misfortune which has befallen you." She raised a hand. "Please, Han, let me continue."

The noise of Chewie dragging a chair over beside his table attracted Han's attention, and he went over and sat down next to his co-pilot, staring maliciously at the rebel leaders.

"It seems that Bain and his men have caused you much trouble, costing you eleven thousand credits in all. But," she hesitated, "you went and sold Wedge's ship, which is Alliance property, for the same amount, so I think it equals out."

"But I'd have eleven thousand credits in my hands right now," insisted Han, "if your men hadn't robbed me, ruined my cargo, my reputation ... "

"You know, he's right about that, Leia," said Luke. His eyes then widened as he realized that he'd just spoken for Han's defense, and that would mean the Alliance would probably end up paying Solo the money he so sorely demanded, and do without the ship Han had sold.

Dodonna groaned as he considered the entire unbelievable situation in his mind. Unfortunately, Solo was perfectly within his rights to demand the money. He had been robbed by rebel operatives; oh, Jan shuddered when he thought of what the rebellion was coming to -- attacking their own friends so viciously. This would mean they would have to compensate Solo for the damages done him, his ship and his accounts. Jan seriously doubted that Han Solo would take anything less than actual cash.

"Han," Dodonna spoke at last. A pair of bloodshot eyes stared at him. "I've deliberated over this situation. You are correct. We will pay you what you demand."

Leia groaned, put a hand to her head and left the room. A perfectly good day, destroyed.

Han had been ready to launch into another virulent speech when suddenly this shocking bit of news about being right hit him. "Really?" he muttered to himself. "All right. I want it before I leave. I'm goin' back to my ship." With that, Han stalked out of the room, not seeming as pleased as he should be, after having gotten what he wanted.

Everybody in the room was silent. For the last half hour or so, Han had been the center of attention, raving on about his money, his ship, threatening to silence anyone who interrupted him with a hard fist in the face. Now nobody knew quite what to say now that it was all over.

"Well," Wedge broke the silence, "I'm sorry about the ship."

"It's okay," Luke replied. "I think, Bain," he added, looking over at the other table, "that you and your friends had better stay away from Han."

Bain just nodded his head miserably.

* * * *

"Oh, Wedge, did you have to tell me this?" Luke complained bitterly, stalking down the corridor at a fast pace, hands roughly stuck in his jacket pockets. "Why couldn't you just have forgotten?"

"You know what Dodonna said," answered Wedge, keeping pace with his friend. "It's not my fault." He then glanced to the side, looking at the wall, and added, "Though I suppose I could have called out."

Skywalker reached his destination quickly. He opened the door to the rec room and surveyed the area. In a split second he had his men targeted and came over to them. "I thought I told you to keep your men away from Han!"

Bain and Suze both looked at the young Jedi, their eyes showing a complete disinterest in the present conversation.

"Frass," explained Luke rather sternly. "Wedge saw him walking into the *Falcon*. Don't you know when to leave well enough alone?"

"Oh, sir," remarked Suze diffidently, "those two will enjoy each other's company. They're both low life." He turned his attention back to the card game he was playing with Bain. "Your turn," he remarked.

"Bain!" exclaimed Luke, catching everybody's attention in the room. It seemed at if all were looking at him except the person to whom he was talking. Finally, after a second demand, Bain looked up. "He's your operative, Bain. I told you point-blank to stay away. Now they're probably fighting."

"Well, if they are, don't you think you ought to stop it?" questioned Bain quite seriously. "He's totally impossible to command, you know. But Fracus is good in a fight." He place his card down and Suze frowned in frustration..

Luke threw his hands up in total frustration, then grabbed Wedge by the sleeve and began dragging him out of the room. "We'll have to take care of this ourselves, Wedge."

* * * *

Chewbacca let out a small, contained whimper of surprise when he neatly sliced his palm along a section of hull he'd been repairing. He squeezed it gently, letting the blood flow from the wound faster than normal, and regarded it silently for a moment. Well, it didn't hurt that bad, but he might as well journey up to the rebel infirmary and let them patch it up. Why use up the *Falcon's* supplies when the rebels were perfectly willing to offer their services? Besides, Han would be of absolutely no help whatsoever in helping him patch his hand. He'd been totally incapacitated ever since Frass had gone aboard the ship to talk .

As the Wookiee began walking away from the ship toward the exit, he bumped into the small forms of Luke Skywalker and Wedge Antilles, interrupting their hasty journey to the Corellian freighter.

"Chewie?" asked Luke. "You seen Han or Frass around ?"

Chewbacca absently pointed toward the ship with his injured hand and a droplet of blood spattered onto Luke's boot.

Luke's eyes widened with horror as his tired mind let the worst imaginable ideas materialize. He made a mad dash for the *Falcon,* totally oblivious to the Wookiee's reassuring remark. Chewbacca just shrugged and continued on to the infirmary. Luke and Han seemed to be so terribly jumpy lately.

Luke and Wedge skidded into the passenger bay of the old freighter, ready to break up the worst sort of fight, only to find both Han and Frass seated at the chess table. Frass was on one side of the cushioned bench which surrounded the table. He was holding his arms to his chest, his head thrown back, laughing hysterically, one bent leg propped up on the table. Han was in about the same state, though his was bent over the table, pounding one fist against the table surface in the same uncontrollable laughter.

Luke leaned over and picked up the bottle which was on the table next to Frass' booted foot. It wasn't any of Han's stock -- must be Frass'. He turned it upside down and looked inside. Totally empty. And the two glasses which were knocked over were also completely devoid of any liquid.

Han's laughter finally managed to die down as he opened his eyes and looked up to his left. Luke was standing there, a rather disappointed -- and also quite confused -- expression on his young face.

Han pushed himself up from the table, wiping some tears from his eyes. "What's wrong?" he laughed.

Luke set the bottle down, oblivious to the fact that Wedge had left as soon as he'd seen the situation. "I thought you two hated each other," he muttered quietly. He had expected a literal bloodbath after bumping into Chewbacca.

"His cargo tried to eat him!" howled Frass uncontrollably, drowning out Han's answer to Luke's question.

"What?" asked Luke, sitting down in the conole seat opposite them.

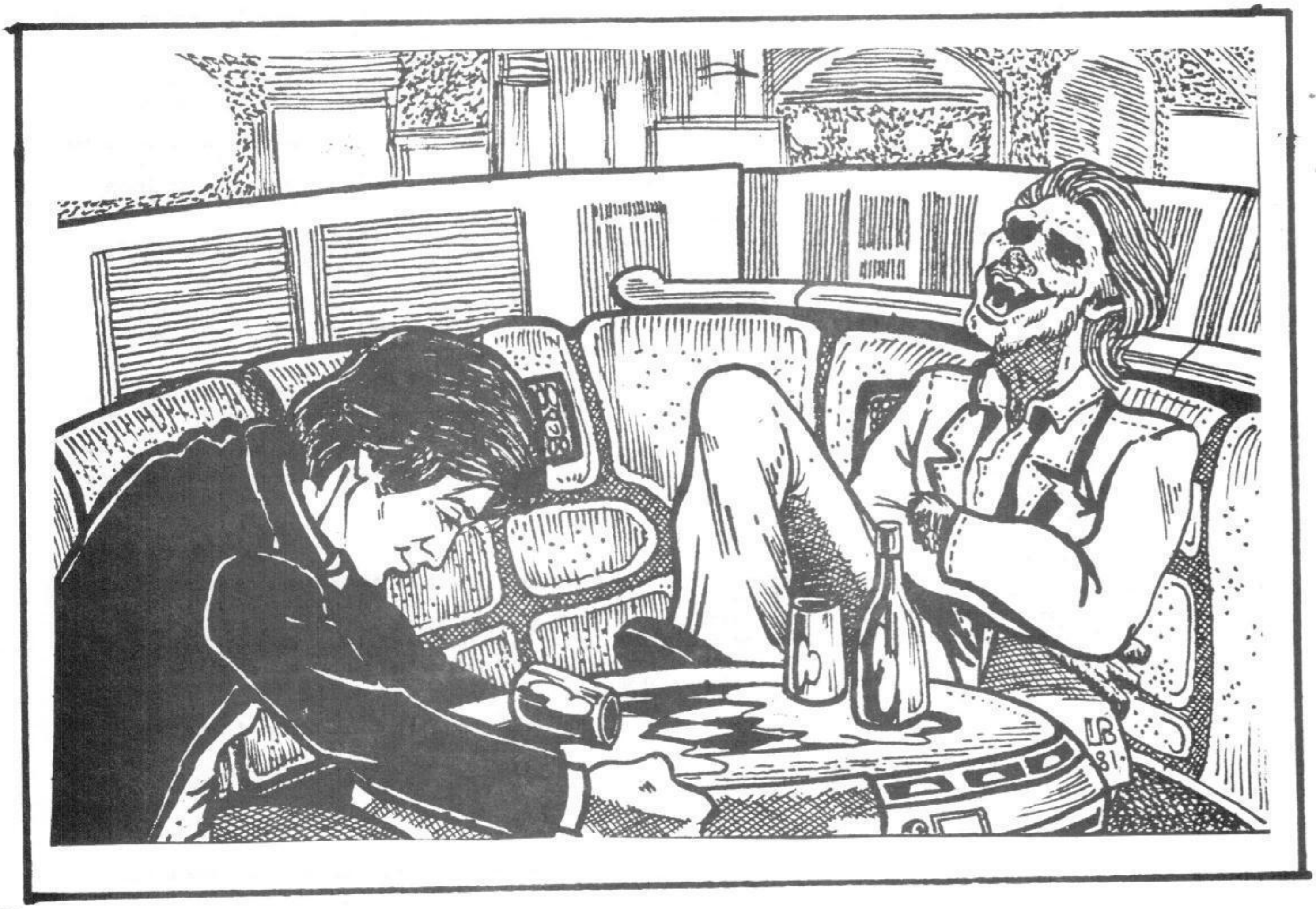
Han stood up, ambled over to where Luke was, and dragged Skywalker from his seat, psuhing him toward the small table. Once Luke was seated beside Frass, Han slid into his original position.

"Oh, Luke," said Han jokingly. "You must really be scraping the bottom of the barrel these days."

"Huh?" asked the bewildered youth.

"Hey, want you to meet an old friend," replied Han. "Hey, Fracus!"

The Utchon managed to contain his laughter momentarily to listen to Han. "Want you to meet a friend of mine, Frass. Frass, this is Luke. Luke, this is Fracus," Han introduced cheerily.



Before Luke could open his mouth to utter any statement, Frass elbowed Luke roughly in the side, then laughed, "The scum of the rebellion!"

Luke slumped against the seat back, wondering if the strain of command had been too much for him in the last two years and if he'd lost his mind. It was obvious that both men were drunk -- their behavior and the empty bottles attested to that. But why should they insult *him* like that?

"Now, Han ... " began Luke.

"Y'know we worked for the same boss once?" interrupted Han immediately. "I used to pilot for Doetz out of Pleth II, remember? Frass used to be one of Doetz' old henchmen. Why, I wouldn't be surprised if we'd been in a brawl together before!"

"Old friends, huh?" remarked Luke rather unhappily. "Who's this 'scum of the galaxy'?"

"Oh, you've just hired the worst pilot on record," Frass answered immediately, to which Han countered, "You're hiring cutthroats!"

Luke was silent as he listened to Han and his former enemy joke. It seemed as though their mutual backgrounds greatly outweighed the differences they'd had only the day before, and they continued their loud boasting of fantastic and unbelievable exploits. There didn't seem to be much sense in bringing up the fact to Han that Dodonna was working feverishly on getting the money for the Corellian. It wasn't actually taking that much work to get it through -- it was just that Leia had approached Luke, asking him to approach Han, to ask if he'd like to do just a little tiny mission for them. No danger of Imperial involvement.

Luke chewed on his lip for a minute, wondering if this was a good time to broach the subject. "Ah, Han?"

"Yeah?" responded the Corellian indignantly, totally ignoring Luke's presense, and bringing forth his blaster, whipping it past Luke's face. Luke pressed his head against the bulkhead at the sight of the weapon.

Frass leaned forward and pulled the weapon close to his face.

"Y'see where I filed it down," pointed out Han, gesturing to a spot on his blaster.

"Oh, yeah, I see it now," exclaimed Frass.

"Han!" cried Luke loudly, frantically.

"What, kid?" asked Han, setting his blaster on the table surface.

"You could've shot my face off!"

"Whaddya think I am? Careless??" Han defended himself as he reholstered the weapon.

"Han, I've got to go," Luke said, trying to rise from his seat. Han didn't pay much heed to him as Frass started up on the conversation again, spouting on about a glorious adventure he'd had while traveling the Ventron system.

Neither of the two inebriated men would budge an inch. In fact, they only seemed to move closer together, relying more and more on the table for support, as their conversation got louder and louder.

"Will you -- ?" Luke stuttered, annoyed. "Oh, forget it!" He stood up on the seat, then proceeded to walk over the table. He went to the center of the bay, folded his arms, and waited for a reaction from Han. Nothing.

Luke turned and was about to leave but decided to try just one question. "Hey, Han. Will you do a mission for Leia?"

Han just waved a hand in Luke's direction. "Sure, kid, anything," he laughed, then went back to listening.

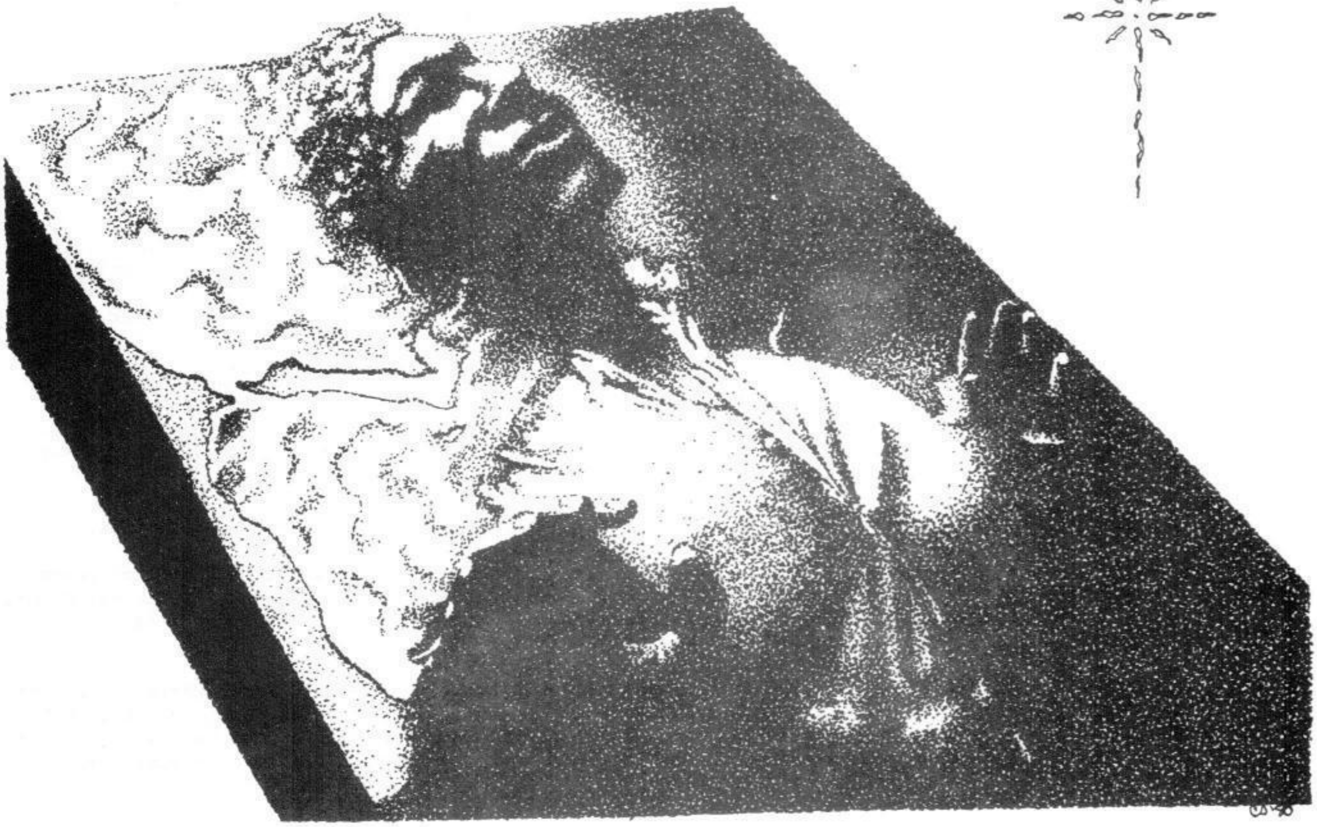
Luke came out of the *Falcon* in a slight daze. He hadn't expected an affirmative answer, not in a million years, even if Han was soused like he was. But ... but he did say yes, he would do a mission. So what if Han was drunk, reasoned, Luke quickly; Han had always proclaimed he was in a perfectly stable sense of mind when he'd had a few drinks, capable of making any decisions. So, if that's what Han said ....

Luke picked up at a brisk gait, whistling happily as he headed toward Dodonna's conference room, where he was most likely to find Leia. In the morning Han would kick himself in the head for what he'd agreed to. In fact, he'd deny it -- but Luke did have a witness in Frass. How fortunate, how lucky the rebellion was to have sent Bain and his men on that mission. Without the total mess-up, the Alliance wouldn't have Han Solo in its service again.

BROKEN EAGLE

Broken eagle
do you know
can you care

Are you aware
of your clipped wings
and my broken heart



Changes *

Sherry Magee

illustrated by Dianne Wickes

Dreams of my young years grow warm in my mind
Visions of shadows that shine
Till one day I returned and found they were the victims
of the vines of changes ....

-- *Phil Ochs*

"Kenny ... Kenny!"

He heard his name far down inside the comfortable, cottony darkness in which he was surrounded. Nightmares sometimes began that way, so he winced and tightened his arm protectively around his eyes. *Not tonight,* he pleaded silently.

"Hey, Kenny, you awake?"

The voice was moving. That time it had come from outside the window above his head. He moaned for it to go away. Instead the trailer door reverberated with knocking, the noise starting an accompanying ache in his head. Jarred from sleep, he pulled his arm away from his eyes to squint painfully at the morning light.

"Come out, come out wherever you are!" called a familiar voice. The knocking started again.

"Shit!" Ken Boyd attained a sitting position, tried unsuccessfully to stand but sank back on the couch as the room spun. From a sitting position it took him several minutes to find his jeans and pull them on, and he was still struggling to get his left arm into a blue checked flannel shirt as he lurched across the trailer to the door. He flung the door wide and a bright, chilly Missouri spring morning made him shiver.

The aromas of damp earth and growing things assaulted his senses. The oaks were beginning to bud, the dogwood was in bloom, but his aching head prevented him from any appreciation.

"Go away!" He shouted, an act which threatened to split his head wide open.

"Well, good morning to you, too." Said his cousin, Sandy. She backed her sorral gelding, Sage King, away from the trailer steps and drew rein in front of him. She had evidently just come up from the pasture, as her levis, damp to the knee, testified. She had donned a green, western cut flannel shirt and jeans jacket against the cold, but her cheeks and pug nose were touched with pink, her curly blonde hair in tousled disarray. She sat bareback on King, the lead rope attached to the halter and looped about his nose for a single rein. To Ken she appeared disgustingly rested and cheerful.

"I didn't think you were ever going to wake up!"

Ken glared at her through unfocused red eyes. The pain in his head was making it difficult to stand upright.

"Get outa here and let me sleep!"

"Boy, somebody sure got up on the wrong side of the bed. I've been here for ages waiting for you. Had coffee with Gram and everything. I finally woke you up so you wouldn't be late."

"Late? Late for what?" He growled.

"The race, you know, circle trackin'? I came out to watch you drive. "

Ken leaned against the doorframe and buried his head in the crook of his arm. His shirt slid away from his shoulder and Sandy caught a glimpse of the ugly schrapnel scars before he pulled it back into place. The gesture made her frown (I'd never make fun of you, Kenny). But, she pretended not to notice.

"You told me you went every Saturday and if I wanted to see you drive, I could ride out with you in the Ace car."

"What time is it?" mumbled Ken.

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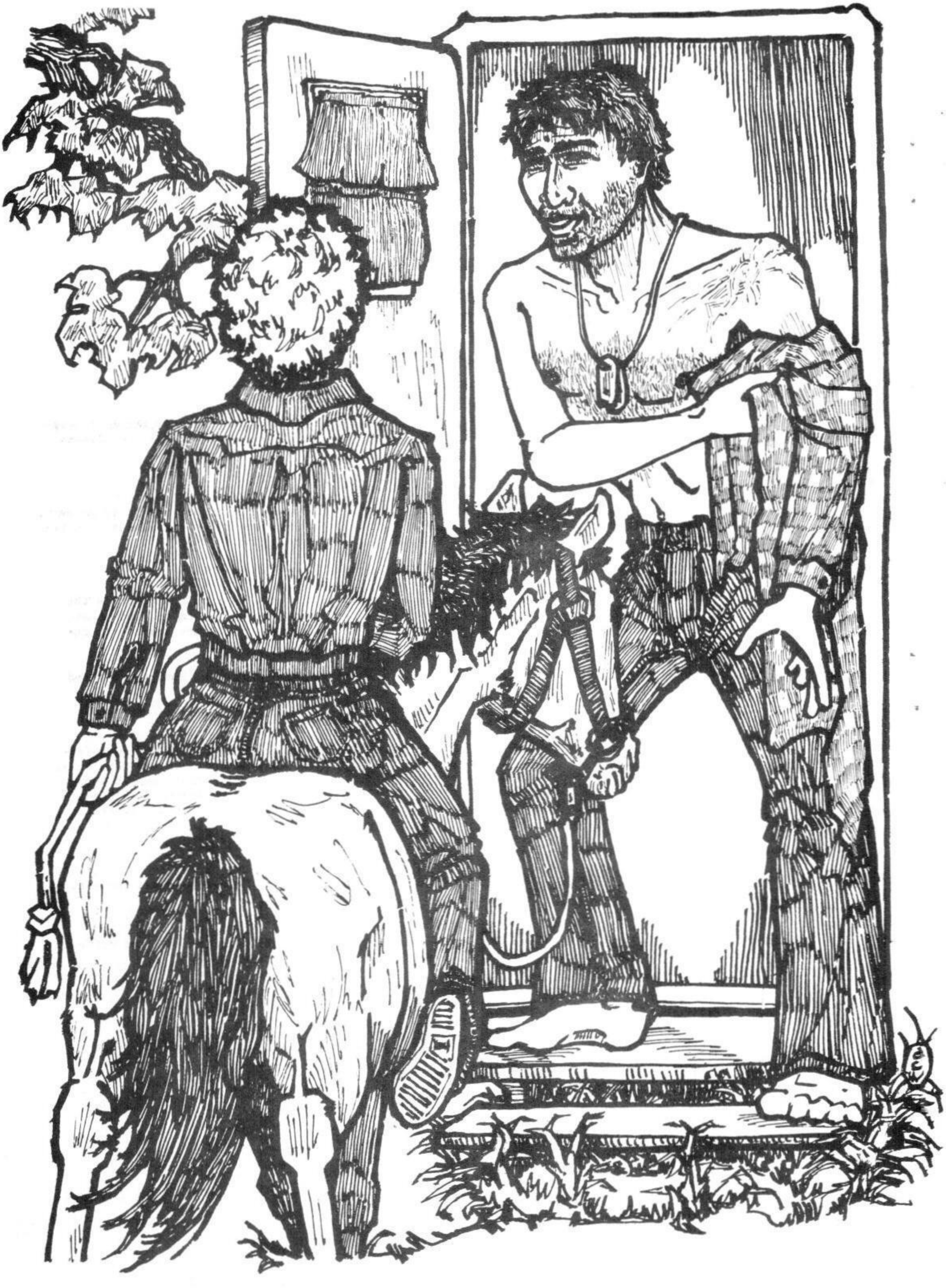
* *Chronologically, this story comes before "Home for Christmas" FACETS 5 --Eds.*



"About nine thirty, so you'd better hurry!"

"Nine thirty! The only place I'm hurrying is back to bed!"

Sandy's frown deepened. "Isn't the Ace Car running okay? Everytime I've tried to watch you race something's been wrong with that car."

"There's nothing wrong with it." He blurted out in an unguarded moment. "I just don't have it anymore, that's all."

Immediately he damned his carelessness, for Sandy slid down from King's back, eyes wide with disbelief.

"You sold the Ace Car? Kenny, how could you? That car was everything you'd worked for. It was your ticket out of here...."

"I didn't sell it," He stated through clenched theeth. He remembered his stumbling explanation to Pappy. "An army buddy of mine needed it to drive to Eureka. I'll go get it after a while."

"You're going to Eureka?" The blonde curls shook in agitated confusion. "Where's that?"

"It's in California and I ... damn it, Sandy! My head is splitting, and it's too damn cold to stand here and pass the time o'day. Will you go away so I can go back to bed?"

She regarded him for a moment, assessing his condition for the first time. "You really are hung over, aren't you. " There was sympathy in her tone. "What you need is some coffee. No, don't bother." She anticipated his protest. "I'll make it for you."

She tied King securely so he could graze, but not tangle himself; then, all energy, she pushed past her cousin into the trailer.

"You just sit down, and I'll fix you right up. You got any B1? No, huh? Well, coffee will have to do."

The protest stuck in Ken's throat. It wouldn't do any good. His small, impetuous cousin was already rummaging through the cupboards in search of the coffee. Reluctantly, he pulled the door shut and shuffled back to the couch where he'd slept the night before.

"I can't find any clean cups. Don't you ever wash up?" On tiptoes, Sandy was trying to see into the small cupboard above the sink.

"You don't need cups to drink Bud." Ken snarled. His cousin shot him a reproachful look,selected two mugs from among the litter that crowded the countertop and began to wash them out.

"You want some cereal? I saw some of that Kellogg's good morning stuff up there."

"God, no!" groaned Ken.

Sandy shook her head. "Where are the aspirin?" Ken made a vague gesture toward the bathroom and she followed the wave to return triumphantly minutes later with the pain relievers in hand.

"Here." She tapped two pills from the bottle, but her cousin grabbed her hand and added another.

"You ought to take those with milk." A spotted jelly glass was selected from the table. A quick rinse and wipe and Sandy reached for the refrigerator door. "There any in here?"

"I wouldn't open it!" Ken's warning froze her hand in mid-motion. "There's some grey stuff growin' in there." He explained sheepishly.

Sandy opened the door anyway, and shut it just as quickly.

"Kenny, that's awful! Gram is gonna move you into a rabbit hutch and fumigate this place if you don't clean up after yourself."

"I was gonna get to it." He growled. "And, Gram's not gonna find out 'cause the trailer's mine and she don't come in here!"

"She just might call the Board of Health." His cousin handed him a glass of water, then set to work cleaning out a saucepan to heat coffee water. When the water was hot she poured some into two mismatched mugs, added instant and stirred. She sat beside Ken watching while he added sugar and took a tentative sip.

"Ow! It's hot!"

"You wanted cold coffee?"

"I didn't want to burn myself."

"You are in a rotten mood."

Ken ignored her while he poured water from his glass into his mug. He felt his cousin's eyes studying him.

"Did you really give away your car?"

He sighed at the renewal of the topic. "I told you it was loan. I'll get it back after a while."

"In Eureka?"

"Yeah." He rubbed his eyes like a sleepy child and tried the coffee again.

Sandy kept staring at him as if she thought he was teasing her and was waiting for the punch line.

"Okay. I'll bite. What's in Eureka besides your car?"

"Worm farm."

"Of course. Did you way a WORM farm?"

"Yeah, a worm farm. What's so odd about that? My army buddies and I, we're gonna start a worm farm."

"Which army buddies? The ones in the picture?"

Ken nodded, reached for the photo and pointed each one out as he said their names. "Adcock, Monroe, Jack, me, maybe that girl, too, uh, Carol. Yeah. Jack come through here with her a couple o'weeks back. He's goin' out to Eureka, get the squad together and start the farm. He needed wheels so I let him use my car."

Head cocked to one side, Sandy was trying to assimilate the idea of her cousin raising worms. Finally, she shrugged. "Does this Jack have any land?"

"Damned if I know." Ken did not seem to consider it a problem.

"How're you gonna raise worms without land?"

He snapped at her. "I ain't gonna raise the worms. I'm gonna raise the rabbits."

"Rabbits on a worm farm? You can raise rabbits here. I noticed you'd fixed up the hutches."

"I can't raise 'em here 'cause the worms like rabbit shit, so you gotta have rabbits where the worms are. Okay?"

"Okay." She toyed with her half finished coffee. The edge to Ken's voice told her he was out of patience. His knuckles were white where they gripped the mug. Well, if Eureka was what he wanted...

"It sounds healthier than living here." She glanced around the cluttered, cramped trailer. "When are you leaving?"

The question startled Ken. "Huh?"

"I mean, if you're going, why are you still here? You should have gone with Jack."

Ken shrugged and sipped at his coffee in a vain attempt to hide his confusion. Sandy frowned at his reaction and tried to find the words for him.

"Were you gonna go to Detroit first? You always said you wanted to go there and look up your dad."

As if he had been kicked, Ken bounced up from the couch, bumping the table and slopping coffee all over.

"I could do that." He snapped. "When I get my car back, I can do that if I want to, alright?"

"Okay. Okay. Calm down." She placated, not understanding what had upset him. "I didn't mean anything." She mopped futily at the spilled coffee with a used paper napkin. "Are there any towels?"

"Yeah. I got some." He helped her dry off the table using short, jerky movements, glancing sideways to see

if she was angry with him. Finally, Ken stood, face forlorn, watching the drying swirls of damp fade from the formica.

"I don't even know if he's really there." He mumbled.

The soaked paper towels were taken from him, and Sandy gave his hand a gentle squeeze as she passed into the kitchen area to dispose of them. He began to gather up several splattered drawings that had been in the way of the coffee. When Sandy returned he stated with more assurance, "Anyway, I'm not goin' anywhere 'til I get that woodbox built."

"Hey, you finally started it!" Exclaimed Sandy relieved by the subject change.

"Sure did. I was up til after four this morning doin' these. " He held out the sketches for her to see. "I figured how much I'd have to built it so Pappy won't hurt his back gettin' the logs out. Should hold about half a cord." He was pleased with himself, smiling crookedly as he admired the plans. "I can finish that up. No problem."

"Looks good, all right."

Ken realized that she was staring at him anxiously and shifted uncomfortably. Something was coming.

"Kenny...."

The unfinished question, the bright, eager expression, Ken had seen them before. Whatever she was about to say was important.

"What?" The question sounded harsher than he'd intended and he saw some of the eagerness fade from her face. Worry surfaced in the almond-brown eyes, different from his own in that they never held green or gray-blue flecks.

"I'm leaving, too." Before he could react, she rushed to explain and the words tumbled over each other. "The University sent me a letter yesterday. I've been accepted! I'm going to be a vet!"

Ken's face was unreadable.

"A vet! I'm going to study veternary medicine!"

It took a moment for the information to sink in, but when it did, he frowned. "Vet, like in horse doctor?"

"Or cows, or sheep, or chickens, dogs, cats, whatever." His blank expression was not the response she had anticipated. The words were harder for her as she struggled for his approval. "I wanted to tell you first. That's why I came up here today. Oh," she hastily added, "I just wanted to see you race, too, but I just had to tell somebody. Dad doesn't know; Mom, either. I applied first of the year and I didn't hear, and didn't hear. Then yesterday, presto! There it was, the letter from the University of Missouri. I'm accepted!"

Silence. Her cousin became very preoccupied with a well-thumbed issue of Popular Mechanics.

"Well..?" Sandy pressed him.

Ken found himself struggling with anger and an unexpected sense of betrayal. Everybody was leaving.

"That's a pretty dumb idea, ya know." He turned on her. "You're too damn little! First time one o'those big steers takes it into his head he don't wanna be doctored, he'll mash you flat." Leaning against the table he folded his arms across his chest. "There ain't no money in it, neither. These farmers never have enough to pay. Doc Elgin lived an' died broke. I thought you'd outgrow that romantic shit. It ain't savin' cute, cuddly critters, ya know. You'll spend your life standin' in pigslop an' shit. What kinda job is that for a girl?"

At once he saw that he'd hurt her. Guilt flooded him as he watched her eyes cloud up and he thought he'd made her cry. Instead, Sandy sat quietly down on the foot of the couch and shook her head.

"Aw, Kenny, " She finally managed, "not you, too." She studied her hands before looking up at him. "Do you think I haven't heard all that before? Why do you think I haven't said anything? I know Dad is gonna pitch a fit. All my dear brother, Phil ever thinks about is the dollars he gets from his real estate business. The family success story will want to have me certified insane so he won't have a poor vet student for a relative. Mom will wail that she's failed in her duty to me as a mother. No one will want to marry a girl who works with cows!" She looked at him in mingled disappointment and appeal. "I was counting on you to be my ally."

Her expression triggered for Ken the memory of a spring afternoon years before. The three cousins, Sandy, Phil and Ken, in t-shirts, jeans and sneakers, had ridden out with Pappy on the tractor. He and Phil had taken turns learning to drive the big machine, while Sandy, too short to reach the pedals, pretended she didn't care to try. Suddenly she had jumped down and scurried ahead to pick up something out of the weeds. Ken had stopped the tractor and he and Phil had gotten down while Pappy finished the row. They crowded around to see what she had. It was a baby cottontail that had crouched in front of the machine, too terrorfied to run. Sandy held it cupped in one hand while she gently stroked it.

"Poor little thing. His mother must have left him." She held it out for Ken to see. With his 4-H rabbit raising project, he was considered by Sandy to be the family expert on rabbits of all kinds. "I'm going to take it home til it's big enough to turn loose."

"Don't be dumb!" Declared her brother, Phil. "They never live. Give it to me and I'll bust its head."

He reached for the bunny, but Sandy pushed him and ran several yards away with the baby clutched protectively.

"No! Let it alone."

"Give it here, Sis. It's just gonna die." Phil was a head taller than his sister, skinny and sunburned with a wiry thatch of dark hair and almond-brown eyes like his sister's. He thought everybody was 'dumb', especially Sandy, and before the summer ended he and Ken would tangle several times. He delighted in bullying his sister, but found she had ways of getting back at him. Ken remembered them struggling over the bunny until Sandy tore free by slugging her brother in the stomach. He yelped, doubled over while she ran to her cousin and looked up to him in appeal.

"Kenny, please!" she begged. "Don't let him do it!" Her eyes were round with worry, but he also read in them trust in him to put things right.

Indecision made him hesitate as he glanced between Sandy and her brother. The cousins fought constantly, often trapping Ken between them. Most of the time he and Phil stuck together, but Sandy, four years younger, openly adored him. The attention caused Ken much embarrassment, but also commandeered his protective instincts in times of conflicts, something Sandy counted on when she was in trouble.

Phil pushed toward them, fists balled, ready to pound his sister. At the last minute Ken shoved Sandy to one side and stepped between them.

"Aw, who cares about a dumb ol' rabbit anyway? Let her have it, Phil."

"She hit me!"

"She's a baby. She don't know no better."

"I am not!"

"... and Pappy's comin' back. If he sees you, he'll cut a switch for sure."

The threat had it's effect. Phil knew that in his grandparents eyes, his younger sister was off limits to punishment. He allowed Ken to push him toward the tractor.

"It's just gonna die!" He predicted over his shoulder. To Ken he declared, "I get to drive!"

"Go ahead." Kenny turned on Sandy and cut short any thanks she had in mind. "You keep it away from my rabbits, you hear?"

She nodded meekly. He hesitated, then thrust his beloved Cardinals baseball cap at her.

"Put it in there till you get home. And, make sure it don't mess!" Then he ran off to catch up with Phil.

Well, Phil had been right, Ken remembered. The rabbit had died and he'd watched from the back porch as Sandy buried it. But, he still remembered the look on her face when she'd appealed to him for help. It was the same expression she wore now. And, he knew he was going to be in the middle once again.

"I just don't want you to think it'll be easy, you know?" He mumbled.

"I know that."

"You'll have to cut up frogs and stuff."

Sandy's expression reflected pained patience. The scene had been rehearsed in her mind dozens of times, but the conversation had been with her father, not her cousin.

"I'm not squeamish, and we're talking about dissection, not vivisection. I've dissected in both high school and junior college biology."

"The first time you lose an animal you'll cry for a week."

"So what?"

"So...?" He broke off incredulously. "Hey, I remember 'Ol' Yeller! At the end of that movie you liked to cried me and Phil out of the pickup."

"I was eight then. And, you'd have cried , too, only you were afraid Phil would laugh at you."

Wide eyed, Ken stared at her in embarrassed indignation before marching to the refrigerator to grab a beer. He wanted to go back to bed, not argue. Instead, he rubbed the cool can against his forehead. At least his headache was receding.

He opened the can and held it out to Sandy with an inquiring expression, but when she grimaced, he pulled the tab and took a swallow, savoring the cold bitterness. His cousin's disapproval was obvious, and he took sulky satisfaction in it.

"You're right. Your dad's gonna be one mad ol' boy when you tell him."

"Don't I know it! But, this means a lot to me, Kenny." Her expression told him she was counting on him to understand. "I've thought about it for quite a while, and I know what I want. I've worked for over a year doing the accounting for dad's dealership, and I hate it. If I stayed there, I'd end up getting married just to get out. I don't want that for myself."

Sitting down beside her, he took another swallow of Bud before placing the can on the table.

"What about Harker? Thought you two were sorta serious."

"I haven't seen him in more than two months." For the first time she seemed defiant. "Just because everybody assumes we'll get married doesn't make it so. He's dumb, Kenny. I had to explain 'Snow White' to him."

Ken snickered.

"He just wanted to know what she was doin' all that time out in the woods with the seven little dwarfs."

She punched his arm, half glaring, half grinning.

"You are gross, you know that."

He returned the grin. "I do my best."

"So what about you and Beth?" Sandy countered. "Everyone thought you two would get married after you got out of the army. You don't even see her anymore. Why not? "

As the muscles knotted in his stomach, Ken stood up and reached for his beer. The conversation was turning in a direction he didn't like. He tried never to think about Beth. His grandparents had been after him when he got home from Viet Nam to marry her, take over the farm, go on as if nothing had happened. Attempted discussions had deteriorated into arguments. He'd tried telling them he needed to get well first, catch up with things. At first they had backed off, but as the months passed and he showed no signs of settling into the life they had planned for him, the arguments began again. Finally, Ken bought a used travel trailer and moved into it.

How could he explain to his grandparents what he didn't understand himself, that the thought of being with a woman filled him with a nameless panic? It was worse than the fear he'd felt when he tried to take the Camero on the track. He felt it now as Sandy's question nudged it into life, and he replied carefully.

"I don' see much o' anybody anymore."

"Well, I'm not seeing Harker anymore, either. Footloose and fancy free, that's how I like it." She looked at him, puzzled and asked gently, "Harker and I just grew apart. Is that what happened to you and Beth? You know, everytime she sees me she asks about you."

"It's none of your damn business! Now just drop it, will you!"

Ken found himself across the room screaming at her, trying to control the shaking in his hands by crushing the beer can. The aluminum bent and split; liquid began to leak between his fingers. He dropped it in the sink, wiped his hands on his jeans, barely hearing his cousin's apology. The panic receeded to be replaced by shame. He couldn't look at Sandy.

"Um, look, I didn't mean to yell at you. I don' feel so good, ya know? I'm glad about the school. Maybe we can talk later, but right now just run along, will ya? I've got things to do." He managed to turn around.

Sandy's expression was stricken. "Kenny, I'm really sorry."

"I know. It's all right. " He still couldn't meet her eyes. Instead, he opened the refrigerator and pulled out another beer. While he was opening it, he heard the door close.

The pop of the pull top broke the silence. He took a long swallow, then began to busy himself with little chores like buttoning his shirt, tucking it into his pants, pulling on his down vest, finding his socks and shoes. By the time he was finished he was calm enough to think over his cousin's declaration.

So Sandy was leaving to become a vet, of all the fool ideas. Now nobody would drop by unexpectedly to talk and ask him questions, half of which he couldn't answer. Well, that was all right. It was hard to think of things to say. But, the company was nice. Having Jack and Carol around for a couple of days had really broken the monotony, had eased the loneliness a little. His life sometimes looked to him like an endless tunnel of identical days where time slowed, almost stopped.

"I don't care." He stated aloud. "It's not a problem."

He prowled the length of the trailer until the beer was finished. Then he tugged on his Napa cap and, plans in hand, headed out the door. As long as he was up he might as well start work on the woodbox. It was easier not to think when he was busy.

On the back porch he looked for the tape measure he had abandoned the night before, found two pencil stubs instead, and finally turned to the open tool box lying in the far corner. He rummaged through files, drill bits and screwdrivers in search of a spare tape. Something shiny caught his eye. It was the Camero's keychain, the Chevrolet symbol dangling from it. The spare engine and trunk keys were still attached. Filled with a sense of loss he squatted beside the toolbox rubbing the symbol between his thumb and fore-finger. The Ace car had been special. He was going flying in that baby, straight to the stars. Nothing could stop him. But, now Jack had the car and he had been left behind. He missed both of them with an intensity that surprised him.

It really was crazy Jack dropping back into his life like that. Four years and never so much as a post card, then a phone call and the crazy dude shows up in Sedalia and tries to hustle him off to the worm farm. It was as if he expected that Ken, Adcock, and Monroe had done nothing but sit around waiting for the day when Jungle Jack would come and lead them out of the wilderness and into Eureka. That worm farm was some dream! But, at least Jack had known where he was going. And, he had a girl, too.

The hazel eyes grew troubled for a moment, but Ken pushed the thoughts from his mind and went back to fingering the Camero's emblem. For a moment he imagined sitting behind the wheel, feeling the throb of the engine, the surge of power when he gave her the gas, the acceleration that pinned him to the seat and took his breath away. Man, that baby could fly! Take you anywhere you wanted to go! She'd been his ticket off the farm and into the spotlight of the racing world. Ken Boyd, the Ace of Diamonds, was going to be the best race car driver in the country, maybe the world! He'd always wanted a job o'racin'... Yeah, he thought bitterly, if you ever get up the nerve to get it on the track.

Hunched down beside the tool box, he let his thoughts drift back into the past.....

* * * *

It was 1970, a hot, muggy August day that had taken on a B movie quality even before he encountered Frank and Artie. He had borrowed Pappy's pickup to drive into town, and there he had signed his army enlistment papers. Then, flushed with his achievement, he had driven out to his girlfriend's house to share the news. He had expected her to be as excited about his future plans as he was. Instead, Beth Brackett, the dark haired, slender ex-Sedalia Central High cheerleader, had burst into tears.

Ken was still trying to understand her reaction as he parked his pickup and walked down one of Sedalia's main streets in search of friends and an illegal six pack. Beth had talked about getting married and settling

down on the farm while he was trying to tell her that after the army, he was going to become a race driver. Then she had cried because he was leaving her alone to go off to war where he might be killed. He had let her cry against his chest, feeling very strong and grown up as he comforted her and reassured her that no bullet could stop the Ace of Diamonds. In an impulsive moment he had even suggested that they drive across the county line and find someone who would marry them. Beth, who had her heart set on a big church wedding with friends and family in attendance, had vetoed the idea; secretly, Ken was relieved. Marriage could wait until he had completed his military service. So Beth had agreed to write him every day he was away. They had parted with promises to see each other later that evening, but he was still puzzling over her reaction when he was hailed from behind.

"Hey, Boyd! Wait up!"

"Hey, Rabbit Raiser!"

Glancing over his shoulder Ken beheld Frank Ives and Artie Williams waving at him from across the street. Under other circumstances Ken would not have been glad to see them. He had known Frank and Artie since grammar school and their relationship had been that of semi-friendly rivals . Frank was the mouth, the brighter of the two who had gone head to head with Ken on occasions ranging from 4H to sports. Artie was Frank's shadow, and the one who started most of the fights. Their taunts had irritated him more than once, but that day Ken raised his hand in acknowledgement. Tipping back his trucker's cap with the Chevy patch on the front, he settled his back against the pharmacy wall and folded his arms across his chest. He was ready for them.

Frank and Artie jogged across the street, dodging traffic, causing an indignant motorist to honk on his horn. Artie made a show of vaulting several feet in the air. Frank held up two fingers in the peace sign. They were laughing as they caught up with Ken.

"Hey, they let the rabbit boy come in off the farm." Frank almost matched Ken's six foot one inch height. He bore a slight resemblance to Jon Voight of "Midnight Cowboy" with his blonde hair and broad features. He played those looks to his advantage with the ladies. He leaned close as he and Ken gripped hands and Ken could smell the beer on his breath.

Artie, a tall Ratso Rizzo type with a great wedge of nose, punched Ken's shoulder a little harder than necessary. "You gonna take us for a ride in that race car you're always talkin' about?"

"Yeah, Kenny. We've been out of school a year now. Way you're always blabbin' I'da thought you'da been more famous than Mario Andretti by now. What's the latest on the Ace o' Diamonds race car?"

Grinning, Ken pushed Frank back away from his face. "You get me a can o' that stuff you're drinkin' and I just might let you in on how I'm gonna get that car."

From his pocket, Frank produced a key. "To my daddy's back store room. You got the nerve to swipe us a six pack?"

The game was an old one. "You got the money, honey...." quoted Ken.

The key was passed and the three of them drifted back across the street and in behind the grocery store. Ives went in first to scout for the stockboys, or worse, his father. When he waved the all clear, Ken and Artie slipped over to the store room, unlocked it and ducked inside to emerge in moments with two six packs of Budweiser. They escaped outside again without being seen and cut across the parking lot behind the store. Ken led the way up the street to his pickup truck. He started the engine while they piled in and peeled away from the curb to the accompaniment of screaming tires.

Just before the city dump, Ken pulled off the main road and onto a dirt track leading to an area secluded by bushes and cooled by cottonwoods. He parked and they headed for the shade to sprawl in the weeds and pop the tops from the cans of their illicit drinks.

"Well, Ace, what about the car?" Inquired Frank, mellowed by his third beer. "What's your story?"

Ken lobbed his empty into the grass where it joined a litter of other cans and bottles. The grove was a favorite place for late night parties.

"Oh, I'm gonna get the car alright. Got it all set up."

"The bank give ya the money, " Artie kidded him. "Right, Frank?"

"A sure fire investment like that, can't imagine why..."

"Not the bank, suckers. I ain't gonna pay no banker all that in'trest."

They started to interrupt and Ken held up a hand for silence. "I've got a way to get the money free and clear, pay for the custom job I've got in mind, everything. If you two play your cards right, I might let you polish the fenders."

"Cards." Giggled Artie, well into his fourth beer. "Like that ace o' diamonds he beat you with." He nudged Frank, who slapped at him.

"Shut up, Artie. I want to hear this." In a gesture brought on more by the beer than by any feelings of affection, he flung an arm about Ken's shoulders. "Tell me, son. What bank are you gonna rob?"

Ken took his time with the reply, opening another can of Bud and taking a long swallow. He gave his two rivals a sleepy, smug smile and let them in on his secret.

"I enlisted."

"You what?" Artie screeched.

"That's right. Got the papers right here." From his shirt pocket Ken produced a copy of his enlistment documents. As Artie and Frank gaped he continued his explanation. "Two weeks from today I'm gonna be the hottest soldier the U.S. Army's ever seen. Hell, I already know how to shoot. What else is there? An' you should see the guns they've got! Why, those suckers'll blow a hole...."

"You enlisted in the Army!" Frank's response was mingled jealousy and outrage, music to Ken's ears.

"Sure did."

"Frank, you've been talkin' about doin' that all summer."

"Shut yer mouth, Artie!"

Artie sulked and opened another Bud.

Ken was grinning ear to ear. "You fellas can wait to get drafted if you want. Me, I ain't got the time to spare. I'm gonna get it over with and let the army buy me my car in the bargain."

Openly suspicious, Ives asked, "How're you gonna do that?"

Leaning back on his elbows, Ken expanded magnanimously on his plans.

"I talked to the recruiting sergeant. See, I ain't gonna need all my pay, so I'm gonna send some of it back to Pappy, but most of I'll have put in the bank. When I get out, there'll be enough for the downpayment on the car and my modifications. If they send me over to that 'Nam place I'll get paid a lot more. Combat Pay it's called."

Artie was dumbfounded. "Can you beat that? The Rabbit Raiser's gonna turn hero!"

"Yeah," muttered Frank. "Don't that just make you wanna shit! Are they really gonna send you to Viet Nam?"

"That's where the action is. It is practically guaranteed."

"You're gonna be just like John Wayne, Sands of Iwo Jima!" The idea obviously appealed to Artie, and Ken nodded agreement as the idea took hold.

"Ain't no doubt about it!" In his mind's eye he saw himself storming beaches single handed. "I'm gonna go over there, kick a few Commie asses and come back a famous man! They'll probably make a movie 'bout my life."

"Like that fella, uh, Audie Murphy!" Shouted Artie. He began to laugh hysterically at the idea and Ken joined him.

"Will you shut you, Artie?" Frank ordered. "If you're so hot to enlist, go ahead."

"Aw, cummon." Artie was instantly crestfallen at having angered his buddy. "You know I won't go 'til you do. Besides, my dad needs me here to work the farm. He wants me to put in for one of those deferrals."

Sitting up in the weeds to brush the stickers from his shirt, Ken experienced a twinge of guilt. He knew Pappy had suggested he do the same as the only son on the farm. But, surely, he rationalized, his grandpappy would understand that Ken had to go. Several of his friends had already been drafted, and a few had enlisted right out of high school. He had waited until after his eighteenth birthday because his grandfather had refused to sign the papers for him to enlist early. But, today he had done it, and Pappy would be proud of him for going to serve his country. Now he was a soldier, not a rabbit-raising farmer. When he returned, he would race driver.

"Hey, Kenny." Frank called him out of his reverie. The boys climbed to their feet and wandered about the grove to stretch their legs and feel the heady effects of the beer.

With sudden slyness Frank asked, "You gonna ask Beth to wait for ya?"

Ken stood blinking sleepily in the warm sun and shrugged. "Sure. She's my girl, ain't she? Why?" Suspicion made him straighten and peer at Frank. He had tried to date Beth Brackett at the time Ken had gotten interested in her. Beth had preferred Ken, and they had gone steady since before he graduated from high school.

Frank's smile was disarming. "I just thought if you weren't gonna ask her to wait, I might take her out. She's gonna be lonesome with her soldier boy gone."

"You ain't gotta chance. Uniform gets 'em everytime."

"Ah, but when the cat's away...."

Anger surged in Ken and he grabbed Frank's shirt. "You mess with her and I'll come back an' feed you to Artie's daddy's hogs!"

Artie muscled in between them,eager to reinstate himself in Frank's eyes.

"You got no call to grab him!"

"Maybe I should grab you."

"Try it, Rabbit Shit!"

And, Ken shoved Artie back into Frank. They both fell, but Artie was up in a moment and swinging. They scuffled without inflicting any real damage. Frank dragged Artie away and shouted at them to quit.

"There's no call for this." He stated. "Soldier boy there's just a little nervous, that's all. Hell, Kenny, " he added with a mocking smile, "You know I'd never bother anything of yours."

Ken glared at him for a moment. "See that you don't." He picked up his cap. "I gotta get back."

"Aw, don't go away mad." Ives laughed. "Have another beer."

"You drink it." An idea struck him and he turned, smiling. "After all, you boys got nothin' better to do." He jumped into the truck.

"Hey, " Artie called. "What about a ride back?"

Ken thrust his head out the window as he started the engine. "Walk'll clear your head from all that beer." He backed the pickup around and accelerated toward the road as they started after him, shouting. Dust geysered from the wheels and the truck fish-tailed out of their reach. In the rear view mirror, he could see them running after him, legs pumping, arms waving. As he turned onto the main road, he shouted back, "Bye, bye, civilians!"

He raced down the highway, windows open, the wind whipping away the last traces of his anger. Everything would work out; he was sure of it. He would do his military service, buy his car, become a race driver. Why he might even get married, or go to Detroit and look up his father. There was nothing a man couldn't do if he put his mind to it.

Strong, tapered fingers reached out to turn on the truck radio.

"... with ten miles behind me and ten thousand more to go. There's a song that they sing when they take to the highway, a song that they sing when they take to the sea..." sang James Taylor, and Ken joined in on the chorus. "Goodnight you moonlight ladies, rockabye Sweet Baby James. Deep greens and blues are the colors that I'd choose...." The music carried him down the road into the dusky twilight.

He turned onto the farm road. There was a creek that ran through their property and necessitated a wooden bridge in order to cross to the house. Ken stopped the truck just before it. Leaning back in the seat, content, he watched the stars come out, looking up through the foliage of oak and cottonwood. A smile quirked his lips.

"Pick a star, " He murmured. "Any star."

The keychain slipped from his fingers to slide out of sight among the tools. The taste of the memories was bitterly amusing in his mouth as he stood and stretched away stiffness.

"What a dumb shit!" He felt a dull anger toward the Ken who had been so young and arrogant; but, the feeling was accompanied by others of confusion and loss. He had been so sure of himself. Where had all the confidence gone?

Oh, sure, he had gotten the car just as he planned. The Camero had been his dream, the vision he had clung to against the nightmare reality of the war. Monroe and Jack had spun the myth of the worm farm around their squad as a haven from the daily horrors of boredom, blood, fear and death. In Eureka they would grow things organically, raise worms to sell to farmers and fishermen. Their lives would be healthy and clean, free from pesticides, pollution and death. He had participated in the dream, agreed to raise the rabbits that were to be his contribution , yet for Ken the dream he clutched closest was that of owning his race car.

He had doodled the design of the Camero on whatever scraps of paper he could find. Aces and swirling flames filled the borders of letters from home as the car took shape in his imagination. He regaled the "worm squad" with talk of the customs job he had planned, of the races he would win. Yet, just as the dream was in his hands, it slipped through his fingers like water.

He had the Camero built to order, had chosen the design and modifications, had it painted with his symbol the Ace of Diamonds, and the name "Canned Heat" to symbolize its power and the big guns he had handled in the war. He should have been faster than a speeding bullet - but, he could never get the car on the track.

On weekends he had taken the Ace car to the races in Sedalia, but no matter how many hours he lavished on the engines, something was always wrong with the carburator or the fuel injectors. A thousand delicate adjustments seemed to go wrong and keep the car from peak performance.

He became obsessed with perfecting the timing. Other drivers offered their help, but he couldn't stand to let them touch his car. When Kyle and Roger got too close, he started a wild shoving, screaming match. After that the heckling began led by his old rivals. He suffered the jeers and humiliation stoically. ("Hey, Soldier boy, gonna show?") On weekends he haunted the track determined to race - and then the panic would start and he'd hear himself say, "I ain't gonna run today."

When Jack arrived, needing the money Ken would earn by winning, he had failed again. But, when Jack had taken over and driven in the race, Ken had experienced a wonderful sense of exhilaration. He had seen the Ace Car free and flying like it was supposed to be. It seemed only natural to send the car with its liberator, to pass the dream along to other more capable hands. He could go to Eureka and pick it up anytime.

"Who am I kiddin'?" Ken mumbled to himself. He was glad the car was gone. Never again would he have to face the shame of taking it to the track only to become too frightened to drive. The dream of becoming a championship driver was dead; the lure of the worm farm was an empty promise, okay for Jack, Adcock or Monroe, but not for the country boy.

The lump in his throat demanded a beer to wash it away.

Back in the trailer, he helped himself to a Bud, but the cluttered, clammy atmosphere of the place drove him to the door. His gaze roamed over the rundown farmhouse and dilapidated outbuildings. Somehow they didn't look so bad against the long, spring-green grass and weeds. Even the old peach tree was in bloom in the near pasture.

Ken wandered down off the trailer steps, pushed past Mehitabel the goat, who butted against his legs, and approached the peach tree for a closer look. He shook his head. Every year he and Pappy thought winter would kill that tree. The lower limbs were propped to help support its weight, and he'd strung wire through an old piece of hose to hold the crotch together. But, it had fooled them one more time. There were soft blossoms fading on the limbs and tiny nodules that promised to become ripe fruit. The whole, crazy farm was coming back to life. By comparison Ken felt sleepy and stagnate.

The clomp of hooves drew his attention and he turned to watch his cousin riding up from the lower pasture on the sorrel, leading the buckskin mare. He settled his back against the tree to watch while Sandy opened the corral gate and took both horses inside.

From the barn he saw Amanda, Gram's cat, stroll toward the horses, tail held high in anticipation of attention. Sandy tied Britches and King, then swooped 'Mandy Cat' up on her shoulder. A year ago, Ken thought, you could hold that tabby in one hand. Now she was big and sleek and had already been a momma once.

Everything was changing, the cat, Jack - Sandy. She wasn't the same little girl who had snuggled up with him and Phil in the back of the hay-filled pickup truck as Pappy took them to the drive in movies. She was all grown up and looking for her future. Becoming a vet wasn't going to be easy, but she had the right to try. And, he admitted, she had the right to expect him to stick up for her. Since his return from the war, Sandy had defended him fiercely on many occasions to friends and family. Guilt nudged him as he remembered the morning, and he wondered if she was angry with him.

He strolled down to the corral fence and leaned over it to sip his beer and watch his cousin work with the horses. There was a half-formed apology in the back of his throat, but when Sandy glanced his way and said "Hi", all he could manage was a hesitant smile. There were smudges of dirt on her face that made him wonder if she'd been crying. He dropped his eyes. When he looked up, Sandy had begun an industrious scraping of Sage King's hide with the shedder, and the long winter coat peeled away in clusters of fine red hair. Britches tugged at her halter and stamped to indicate that she felt the attention should be focused on her instead of her stablemate. Ken moved down the fence to rub her head while she tried to scratch against his scarred shoulder. He stopped her by picking up a brush and letting her use it to quiet the itch. Finally, he climbed the fence, picked up the curry-comb, and began to work on her coat.

The cousins worked in silence for several minutes.

"Uh, Sandy?"

"Yes."

He rested the currycomb on Britches' rump. "I'll go with you to talk to your dad. Okay?"

"Thank you. I can handle it myself."

The rejection tied his tongue. Tossing the currycomb back with the rest of the grooming equipment, he got his beer off the fence post and took a long swallow. Britches stretched out her neck to indicate interest.

"Better watch her." Sandy warned over her shoulder. "She'll snatch the can out of your hands. She spilled a coke of mine last time." Her tone had softened a bit, encouraging him. He held out the can.

"Want some?"

"It's not even noon!"

His grin was crooked. "Breakfast of champions."

Sandy turned her back on him, but not before he saw her smile. Britches made a grab for the can, missed, but caught his shirt sleeve.

"Hey!" He jerked away and heard Sandy giggle.

"I told you."

"Yeah." He grinned sheepishly. "So you did." Sitting the beer can back on the fence post out of the mare's reach, he began to fuss with King's forelock while the sorral nuzzled his shirt buttons.

"What are you gonna do with them?"

Sandy stopped work. "How do you mean?"

"When you go off to college, what'll you do with King and the Brat?"

Face wistful, Sandy paused to clean the teeth of the shedder.

"I guess I'll have to sell them. Britches at least. I won't be able to afford to take them to Columbia, so I won't be entering any rodeos."

"Pappy and Gram won't care if you leave 'em here. "

Sandy shook her head. "They're too good to just stand around all the time. Britches gets impossible without work, and she's too good a barrel racer to let her get fat and lazy." She rubbed King's neck. "And, he's still got a lot of years left. Besides, I' ll probably need the money. I'll quit my job after the fifteenth. Then I'll go to Columbia to find an apartment, and maybe a part-time job."

"Your dad's not gonna let you starve, you know."

The set of her jaw told him her mind was made up. "I don't want to take one more penny than I have to. I've got to do this on my own, Kenny."

He nodded as he recalled his own fierce desire for independence. But, the horses had been special to Sandy since he could remember. She had broken and trained the buckskin herself. Before he realized it, he heard himself say, "I get along okay with the Brat. If you want to, I could work 'em while you were at school. At least, til you get settled."

A real smile lit her face.

"Really? You'll take care of them?"

He shrugged. "What kind of a vet are you gonna be if you don't have something to practice on? I ain't volunteerin' for that, let me tell you!"

For a moment he thought she would hug him, but her excitement faded.

"You can't work horses from Eureka."

"Eureka?" Ken gave her his blank look that said he didn't know what she was talking about.

"Eureka? Your car. Remember?"

"Oh, yeah. Well, I don't think I'll go there for awhile."

"What about your friend, the worm farm?"

"You want worms?" Ken broke away and disappeared inside the barn to emerge carrying a shovel. "I'll give you worms."

Sandy's smile was uneasy. "What are you doing?" She followed as her cousin scrambled through the fence and turned over a spadeful of earth in the new, spring grass. He was on his hands and knees pawing through the dirt, and moments later thrust a handful of fat, squirmy earthworms into her hands.

"You got worms!" He announced.

For a long moment Sandy stared at the cluster of writhing, segmented bodies, lips curled in faint distaste.

"You're right. These are definitely worms." And with that, she pulled open the front of Ken's shirt and dumped the entire handful down his chest.

He war whooped. There was a frantic scramble while he tugged his shirt free of his jeans and sent the worms tumbling back into the grass. Grabbing up a long one, he chased after Sandy, threatening to make her eat it, until they were both laughing, out of breath and willing to call a truce.

"Thanks, Kenny." Sandy said when she'd caught her breath. "This really is important to me."

They shared the remainder of his beer in easy silence. Finally, he felt her eyes studying him and turned to smile at her. His cousin cocked her head to one side as if attempting to penetrate the surface of that smile.

"Why'd you get so mad before? "

His answer was an unsatisfactory shrug. "You've gotta go. I know that."

She was puzzled, feeling his unhappiness without being able to identify the cause. "I'll be back for the holidays. Christmas for sure."

And again he smiled. "I'll look for you." He dropped his Napa cap on her head and watched the worried expression vanish.

"I might have to ask you another favor."

"What's that?"

"I'm going to need a car." Before he could interrupt, she rushed into the explanation. "I know Dad could sell me one, but I don't want one of his new monsters. I could never afford the payments. I've been saving my money, and I think I've got enough for a used car, but I'm afraid if I go to one of those dealers alone, he'll sell me some junk heap...."

Ken held up a hand for silence. "I'll find you a car!"

NAPA

She beamed at him. "Thanks. I knew I could count on you! Whoopee! I'm really leaving!"

Her enthusiasm was contagious, but there was a forlorn, lost quality to Ken's smile as he responded to it. He looked down at his cousin who bristled with energy and hope and plans for the future. A part of him longed to go with her; another part knew he was not ready yet. Sandy was passing out of his life, and instinct told him things would never be the same between them again.

"What's wrong, Kenny?" Sandy caught his arm and turned him toward her.

He swallowed hard, shook his head.

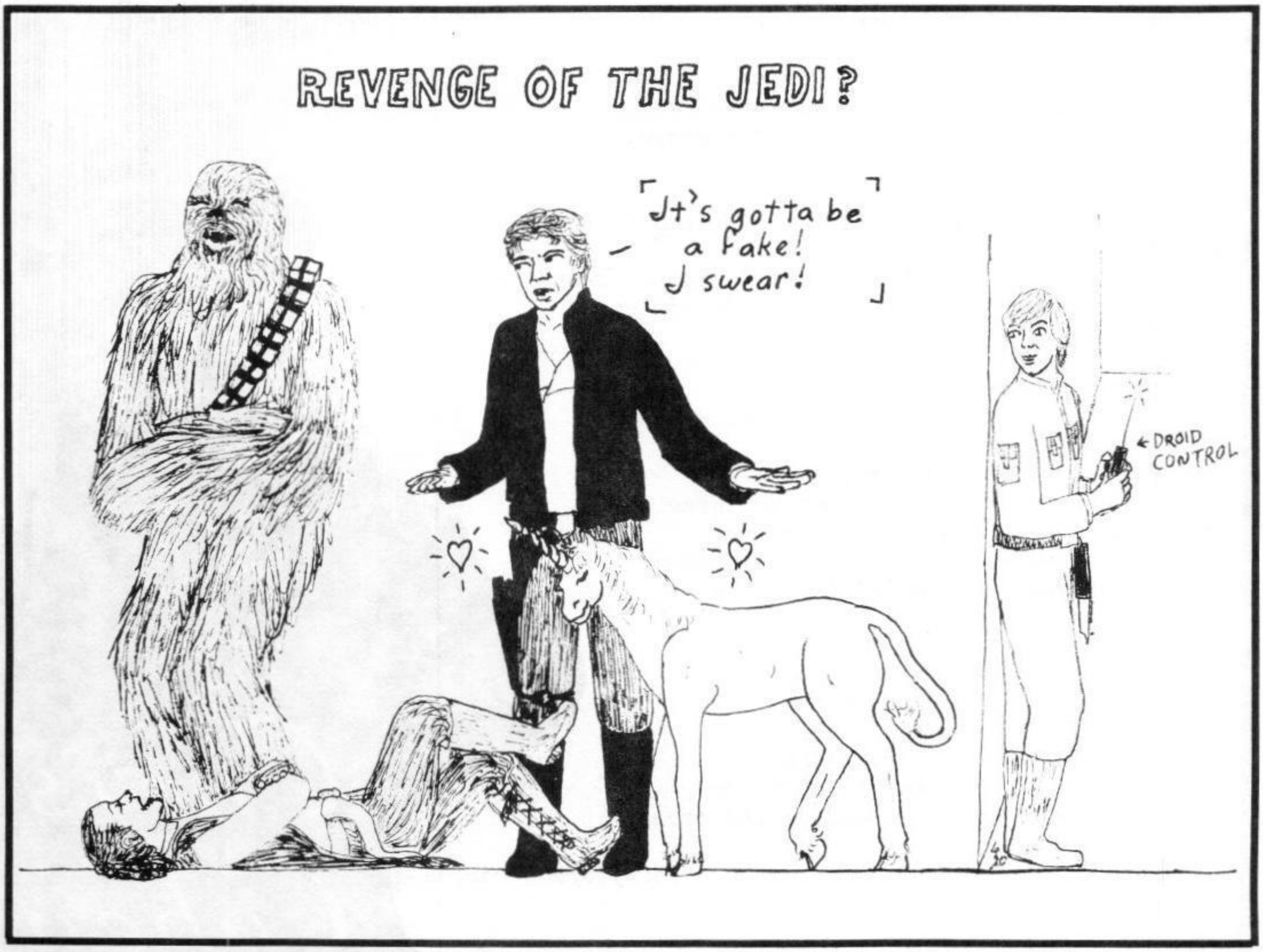
"I'll do something for you. Just name it."

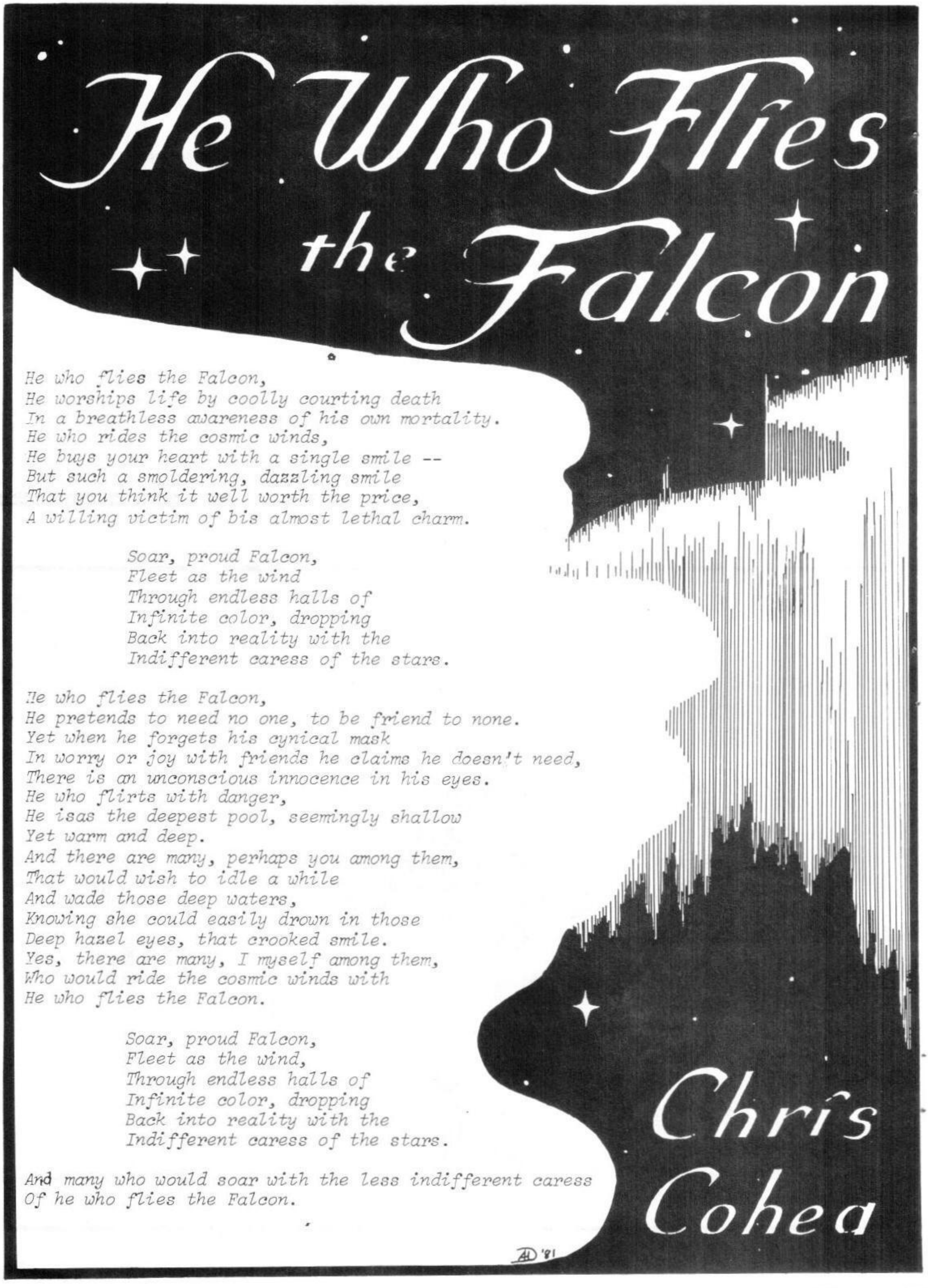
The concerned, eager expression was too much for him. Ken couldn't trust his voice. Instead, he hugged her with a sudden fierce intensity, finally managing to say, "Just you make it, Honey. Don't let anything stop you!"

"I promise." She stated, even as she returned the hug.

After a few moments she wiggled in his embrace. Ken was reluctant to break the contact and held her at arms length while she pulled off his cap and returned it to his head with a wink. He found a crooked smile.

"You'll knock 'em dead, Kid. Ain't no doubt about it." And with a nod, he let her go.


REVENGE OF THE JEDI?
It's gotta be a fake! I swear!
← DROID CONTROL



He Who Flies the Falcon

He who flies the Falcon,
He worships life by coolly courting death
In a breathless awareness of his own mortality.
He who rides the cosmic winds,
He buys your heart with a single smile --
But such a smoldering, dazzling smile
That you think it well worth the price,
A willing victim of bis almost lethal charm.

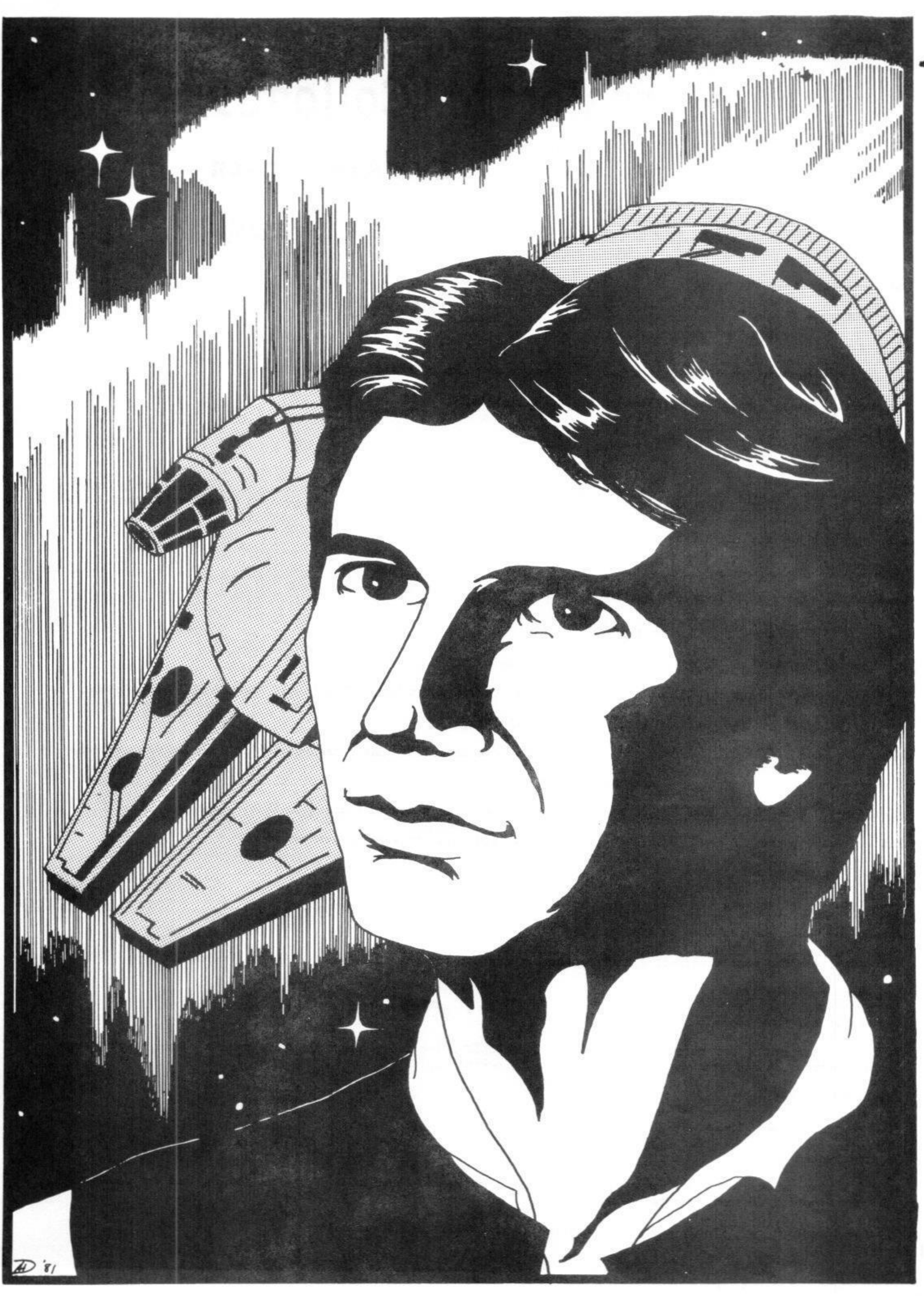
Soar, proud Falcon,
Fleet as the wind
Through endless halls of
Infinite color, dropping
Back into reality with the
Indifferent caress of the stars.

He who flies the Falcon,
He pretends to need no one, to be friend to none.
Yet when he forgets his cynical mask
In worry or joy with friends he claims he doesn't need,
There is an unconscious innocence in his eyes.
He who flirts with danger,
He isas the deepest pool, seemingly shallow
Yet warm and deep.
And there are many, perhaps you among them,
That would wish to idle a while
And wade those deep waters,
Knowing she could easily drown in those
Deep hazel eyes, that crooked smile.
Yes, there are many, I myself among them,
Who would ride the cosmic winds with
He who flies the Falcon.

Soar, proud Falcon,
Fleet as the wind,
Through endless halls of
Infinite color, dropping
Back into reality with the
Indifferent caress of the stars.

And many who would soar with the less indifferent caress
Of he who flies the Falcon.

Chris Cohea


AD '81

Intergalactic Colloquy

Eva Albertsson

illustrated by Stephanie Hawks

Who spoke? I nearly cut myself.

All I said was "Hello."

Who are you?

If you don't know me, you'll find yourself in a tough spot one of these days, kid.

All right, I guess I know you well enough. What do you want?

Chat a bit.

Why?

'Cause I'm sitting here without fuel, in a shot-up ship three parsecs from the nearest habitable heavenly body -- natural or artificial -- with roughly 10,000 seconds of air supply left, and I'm getting kinda bored, that's why!

I thought you had air recycling systems in those things.

Defunct.

Well, then, repair it. Gives you something to do.

I would, if there were anything left of it.

How come you allowed the *Falcon* to get that smashed up?

Who said anything about the Falcon? *She's all right, Chewie's got her. This is an Imperial cheese-freighter.*

How the hell did you get yourself into a mess like that?

Never you mind. It's a long story and I don't wanta talk about it. But I assure you, it's no *laughing matter.*

I merely chuckled. Slightly. Can't you pull out of there?

Sure I can. When Chewie gets back. I'm waiting for him. Can't you talk about anything else?

Hmm ... Yeah, I think I can. What should I do to ... you know, to sort of get you *right?*

Kid, if you don't know by now, you never will.

Could always get better.

Suppose so. What do you want to know?

Well, what are the most outstanding differences between us, for one thing?

You mean, in looks?

No. But, yes, that too.

Well, it never was my job to check on myself, but I should think I look much the same as you. Same height, same build, pretty much the same face, except I'm better looking ...

That's your opinion!

'Course. Only one I trust.

No differences at all?

Hmmm ... your cheeks, nose and hands might come out slightly too broad at a close inspection, and you wouldn't fool an Authority ID scan, but otherwise ....

I've no intention to. Kindly keep your universe to yourself. How about colors?

Brown hair, brown eyes ...

Brown?

Light brown. With a hardly noticeable squint. And speaking of colors --

Yes?

I do change shirts once in a while. Yellow flatters me.

Says who? All the ravishing beauties on Xyzpbar IV or something?

No, they're all color-blind in that range.

I was only kidding.

Me, too.

By the way, how old are you?

Depends. What do you count in?

Years. Planetary revolutions around the sun.

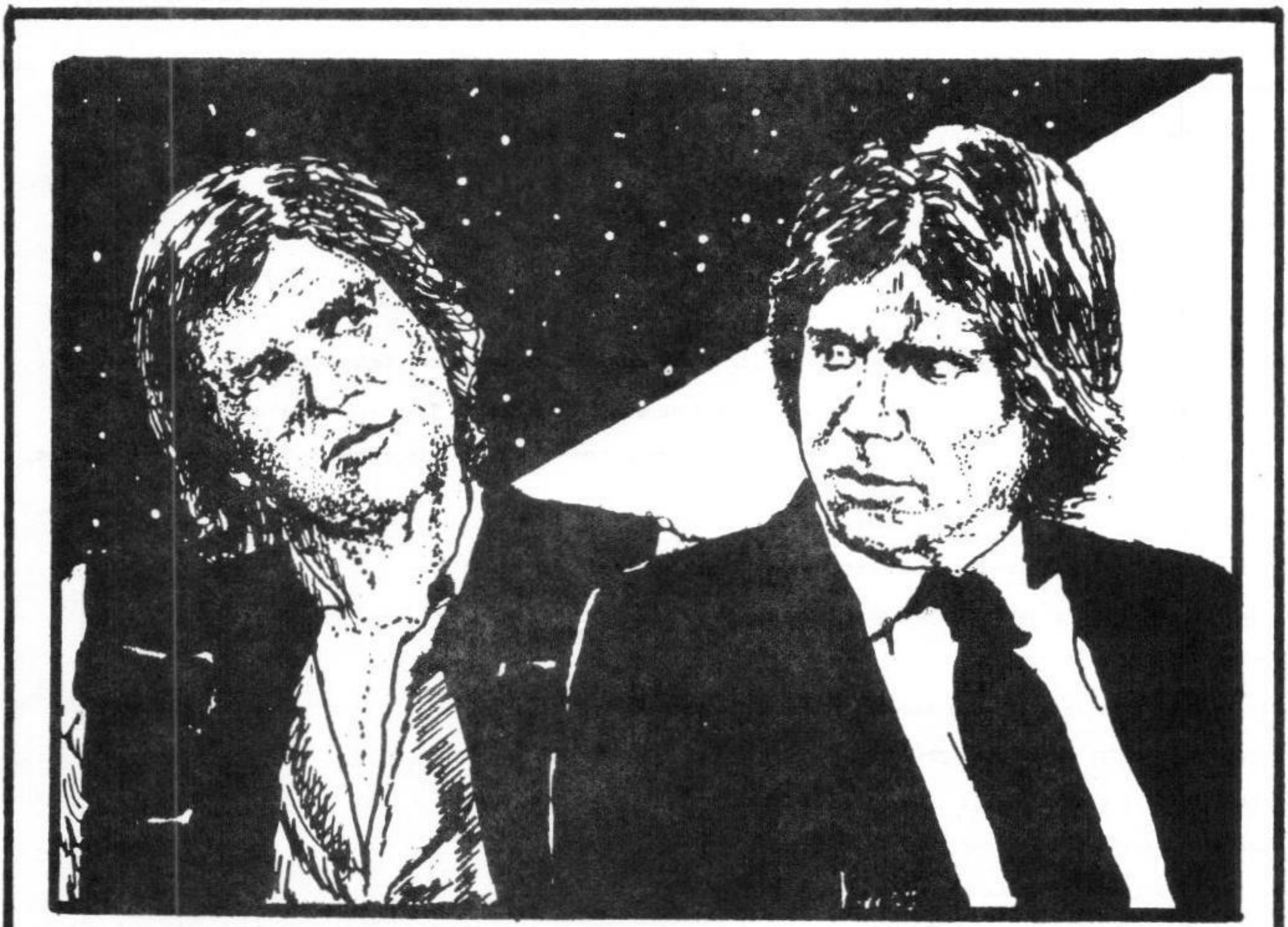
In that case, eighty-seven and a half.

What?? Oh, got you. How long is a Corellian year?

12,623,040 seconds.

Can't you give me that in Standard Timeparts or something?

Standard *timeparts? Time can't be standardized.*



Everyone keeps using them.

Where d'you keep the gadget for measuring them? You must've hit on something really ingenious on that planet of yours.

In the stories, I mean, you idiot. What about your seconds, then?

A second is defined as -- wait a bit, I'll punch it up -- the time of 9,192,631,770 cycles of radiation as issued by a transition between two adjacent levels of energy in the basic condition of caesium-133. All according to this here ship's computer.

Sounds vaguely familiar. I think we have the same definition. Isn't that standardization?

Uh, well, in a sense, but in this case it's confined to one spot at a time -- sorry about that, no pun intended -- what I meant was, there's no relation between, say, seven o'clock on Corell and half past thirty-two on Imperial Station VI:B

Nothing like your galaxy being "long ago" from mine?

Is it? Then I'm glad that concept lacks all meaning at this distance. Or I'd have felt pretty dead, talking to you.

Hm. There was something you said, something in that definition ... oh yeah, d'you actually call it caesium?

I *don't know what it translates as.*

Trans ... wait a minute. What're you speaking? Corellian?

I'm thinking in Intragalactic at the moment, but I doubt it would make much difference even if I were to switch to Novanian merchant's cant. You seem to be getting it in your tongue anyway -- whatever that is.

Practical. Come to think of it, why's your ship named for a falcon? Translation mistake?

We happen to have falcons, on quite a few planets. Didn't know you had any, though.

Coincidence. Speaking of the *Falcon*, anything there I should think of? About how to move in a spaceship, for instance?

N-no, you're doing all right. Except you sometimes pull the lever for opening the hatch when you handle the guns from the cockpit. The results could be confusing. Not to say devastating.

I'm told to pull those, to stay on camera.

No offense. It's given me many a good laugh.

Rearrange your friggin' instrumentation!

Hey, I said no offense! Also, you tilt her a bit funny when you ...

That's not me, that's Special Effects.

Sorry. Tell them to right her a bit more, and to study some fights in space, before they try to ...

I don't tell them anything. Not my department. And we don't have fights in space. Fortunately.

You can say that again. I just wanted to point out, freighters don't bank in space. Nothing to bank against, see. What'd they use, rudders?

Don't blame me! They could use paddles for all I care!

All right, all right, but I'm still entitled to laugh my head off, ain't I?

If you've got nothing better to discuss ....

Such as?

What's really the relationship between you and Chewbacca?

Nothing like that; we're just friends.

Knock it off; I was serious. I may need to know.

Whew! I -- don't think I can tell you that.

What's the big secret about it?

No, it's just that ... I don't know how to put it. We're friends, you'll have to take it from there. He's my best friend, and I'm not in the habit of collecting friends. Better not to, in my trade.

His -- ah -- outward appearance doesn't make it easier for you to relate to him?

What d'you take me for? I've been around long enough not to care whether a truly reliable person has fur, or scales and twenty-five tentacles, or ... oh! I think I see what you're getting at. Now don't you say it! Never say that! Besides, stop to consider for a while; he's furry, that's true, but what else? Whereas, on the other hand, I'm the smaller one, and with a little less than half of his life span -- I hope -- so, in that case, who would be more likely to regard the other as -- a pet?

All right, I didn't say it. But you do hug him from time to time, like one would a dog.

What's a dog? Never mind. Yes, of course I do, it's the traditional way of greeting each other, on his planet as well as mine. So what?

Nothing, you've clarified. What about the Princess? Are you in love with her?

What princess? Oh, that one! Cute kid -- but no.

Just thought I'd ask, while I had you -- on the line. Didn't think you were.

She *loves* me, *though*.

You're kidding. She's fawning all over Luke.

Ostensibly. Since she couldn't have me. Or wouldn't, on my terms, anyway.

Are you always that stuck-up?

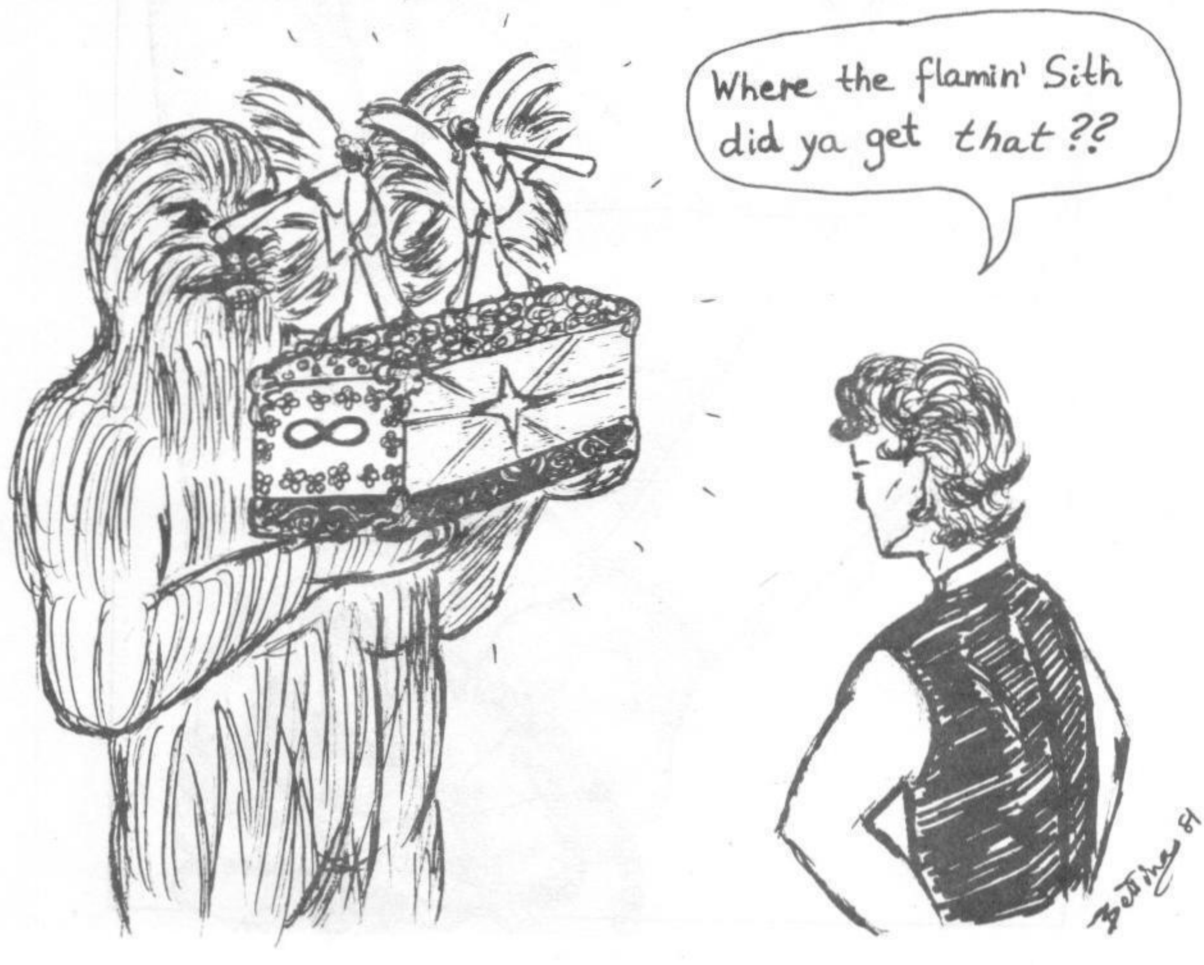
No, but occasionally I run into this trouble that nobody believes me, when I'm telling the truth.

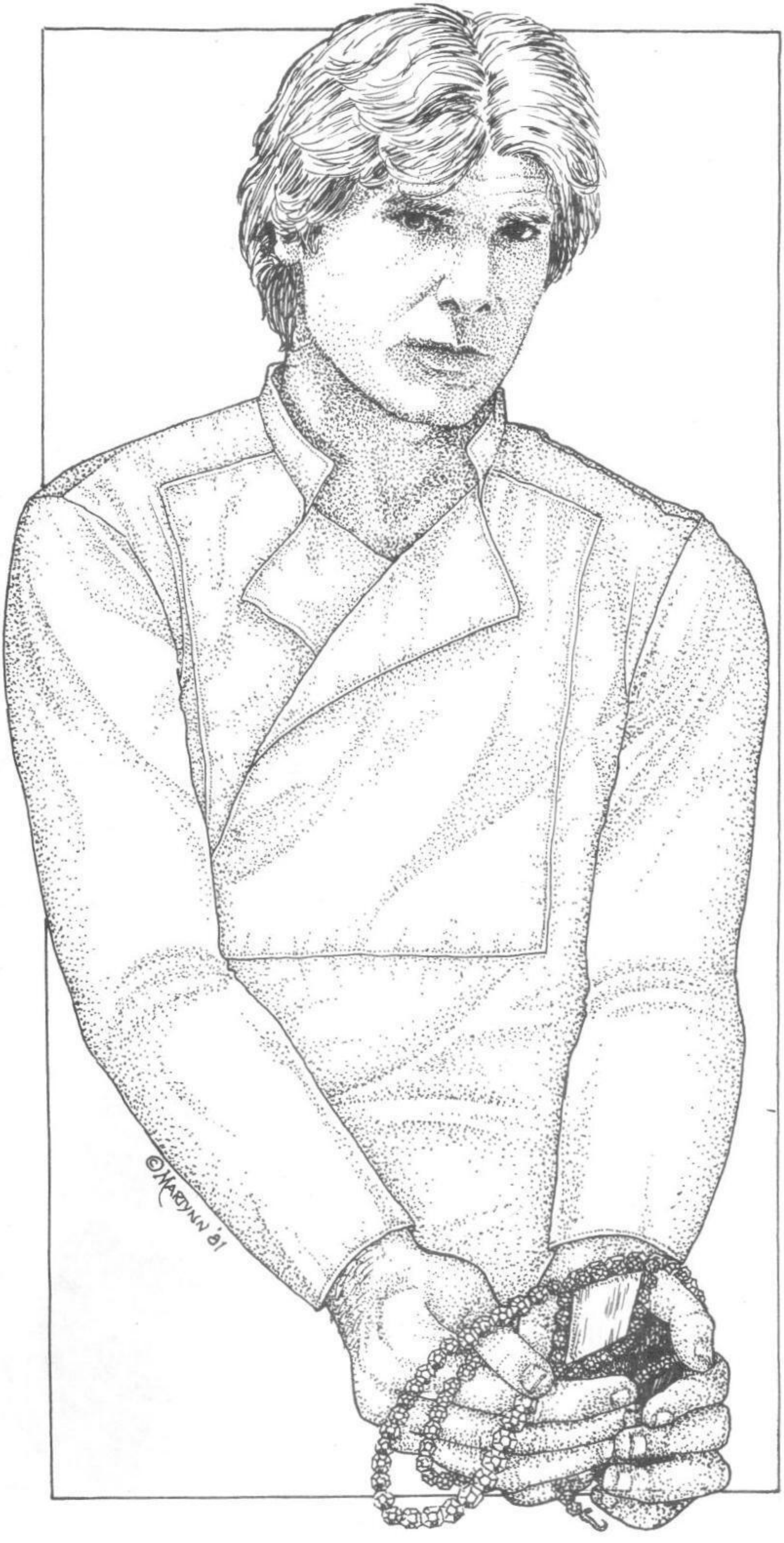
Tough luck. By the way, what are you really, a pirate or a smuggler?

Smuggler first. Still, I've hijacked ships from time to time, taken prizes and so on, when there's been reason enough to ... hey, here's Chewie now, zooming in to pick me up. Guess this is good-bye then. Hey, kid, keep me alive.

What did you say?

Nothing. Happy landings.


Where the flamin' Sith did ya get *that*??
Bettina 81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Westron Wynde

Susan Matthews

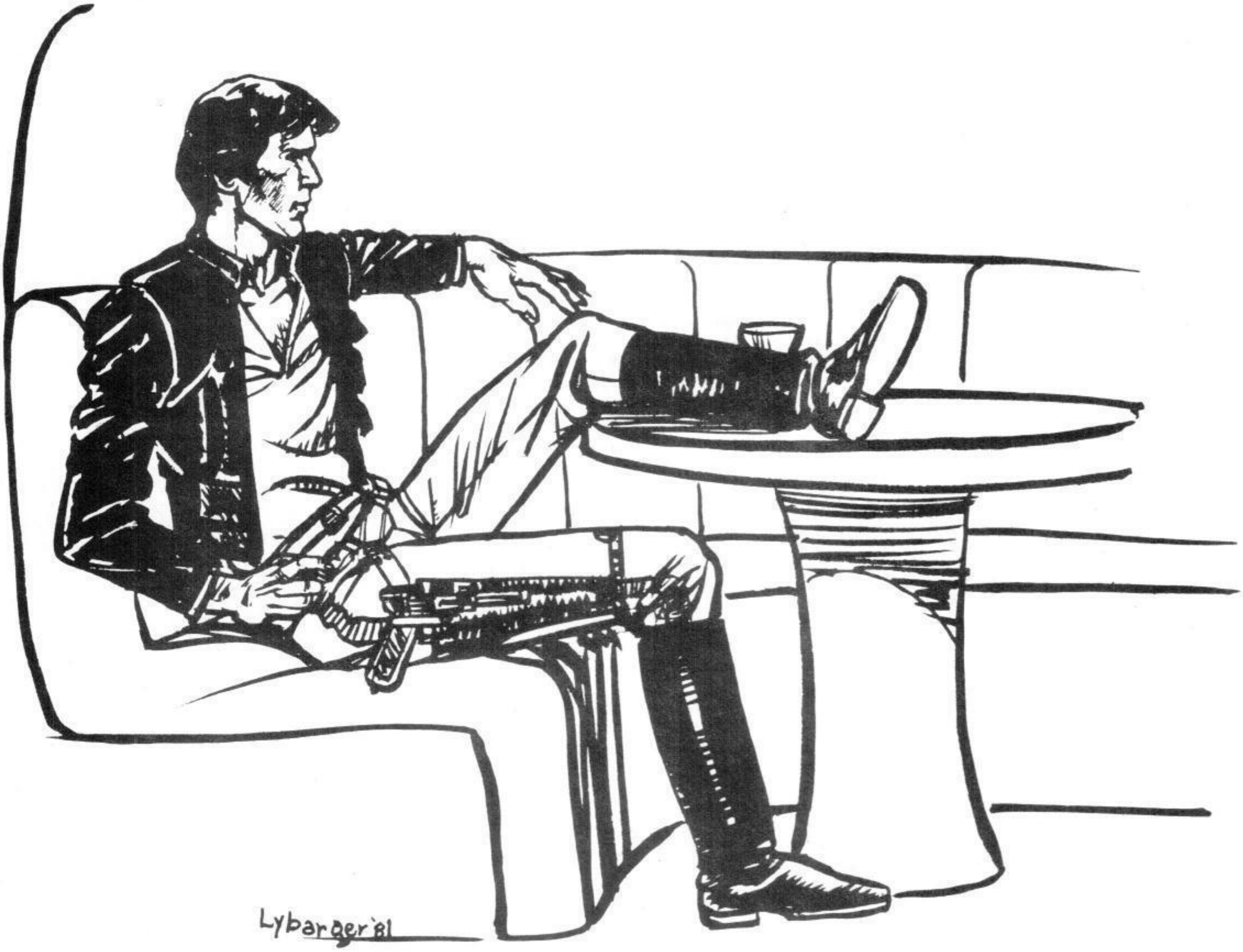
'Course, there's -- oh, that much difference 'tween loving and rutting,
and all of that space between lusting and sharing;
and all of that distance from women and girls --
ah, wonder if I could see Thera again.
It ain't like I've known only one or two women,
it ain't like I haven't had lovers or friends;
but I'm tired of waking up with people I don't know,
and wondering where to find Thera again.
I ain't been a virgin for fourteen years past now
and I ain't had Luke's innocence twenty years more --
played lots of love-games, but it's gettin' to where
if it ain't with a friend, I'm not eager to share.
It's not like I always have to have my own way,
and for both of you to play 'ace' in bed's fair;
but most smugglin' ladies don't know how to surrender
and you're both missing out, unless equally paired.
It took me a while to figure it out, yeah.
I ain't a bad stud, never had to much worry
about sleepin' alone -- someone's usually willing,
if they know that you're not gonna put 'em to shame;
but I'm tired of having to prove it over
and over again, every night, every girl,
tired of wakin' up feelin' embarrassed
or havin' her wake up and ask me my name.
It's nice to have friends you can take just to dinner,
nice to know women who can made demands
without makin' you feel -- well, accesory to pleasure,
let you feel like yourself, not just extra hands.
No, I ain't gettin' old. But I ain't gettin' younger,
Chewie allus said it would happen to me --
comes a time when the war-games have lost all their savor
and I wonder if I should see Thera again.
I'm already as old as most outlaws live to
and I don't think I'd mind it much if I slowed down;
I've done stupid things, pulled dumb stunts and lived through 'em;
but the odds and the gods, they both favor the young.
Now don't get me wrong, I ain't thinking of lookin'
for her just to lay her, repeat an old thrill;
be enough just to see her, find out how life's treatin' her,
see that my memory ain't gone askew.
It's good to know that the worlds hold such women --
women whose partner have got to be men,
adult males, wise enough to know that their passions
can be as well expressed in ways other than in bed.
It's gettin' to where I'd like a steady partner,
like Chewie, as close, but in different ways;
and Thera was proof that I could find a woman
to stand so near to me, for the rest of my days.
Odds are that Thera has found her true partner,
she sure was a woman to go her own way,
and she's probably got herself a steady lover --
It was her decision that she couldn't stay.
But ... think I'll go find her, see how she's doing,
talk about our adventures -- just she and I, friends.
Who knows, maybe I can do her a favor,
offer her transport, free passage, for home.
'Cause there's that much difference between women and females,
so much more to partnership than female and male;
and friends should be valued wherever you find them --
I think I'll go and see Thera again.

Scoundrel

Karin Zygowicz

You're a scoundrel, Han Solo,
A rogue.
Maybe that's why I love you.
You go your own way
And make your own rules.
Against my better judgement
You have a way of
Carrying me along with you.

You're a mystery, Han Solo,
An enigma.
You've a galaxy to play in
And the *Falcon* to take you there.
Beneath that cynical grin
There's more to you
Than meets the eye.
That's why I stay with you.



A Bad Case of Corellian

J. A. Berger

illustrated by Wanda Lybarger

The heavy titanium grilled plating fell suddenly into place and the air filled with hot Corellian execrations. Han Solo got to his feet, glared at the closed panel and filled the shuttle's artificial atmosphere with more choice descriptions of what he thought of the vessel, is manufactures, and space travel in general. He was not a happy man when he reached the cockpit and fell into the pilot's seat.

"Where in hell did you find this derelict?!"

"What's wrong?" Leia Organa stopped him, an exasperated air to her sharp words. "Why didn't the hyperdrive engage?"

"Because, your Royalness," Solo commented sarcastically, "we *have* no hyperdrive! I don't think it's been serviced since the Clone Wars. Why in hell did you charter this-- this--" he looked angrily about the small vessel, "without having her checked out first?"

"It was the only one available for long range travel! I took what I could get!" Leia snapped. "You were the one that insisted on staying an extra day to visit an *old* friend." The young Alderaanian put special emphasis on old, and the handsome man beside her returned her glare.

"*You* said you could arrange for a ship!"

"And I did!"

"You sure did."

"Han, we have to get to Talas 6."

"You think I like this any better than you do? If you would like to get out there and push we might get there ahead of the *Falcon,* otherwise forget it. This ship can't do it!"

Leia groaned. "Han, there has to be some way around this mess."

A silence fell over the small cockpit as each worried over private thoughts, which tended to place most of the blame of the situation on the other.

"I think I know a way to shorten our trip enough to get us there on time," Leia finally said.

Solo shot the young senator a suspicious glance. "No."

"The least you can do is listen!"

"I listened to you yesterday, and look where it got me!"

"If I read our star charts correctly," Leia continued, avoiding the hard look of her fellow traveler, "we're approaching the Davalian system, where we were to engage hyperdrive, avoid it, and get to Talas 6 before Luke and Chewbacca, right?"

Solo nodded, his hazel eyes hooded with a growing concern as to where this conversation was headed.

"Okay. If we go through the system instead of around it we'll still get to Talas 6 ahead of the *Falcon.*" She turned to face the Corellian, a pleased smile on her face.

Solo mumbled softly under his breath. "No. We are not going through the Davalian system."

"Why not? It's a perfect solution. Would you rather Luke and Chewie have to wait for us, sitting in the middle of an occupied planet?"

"I'm not taking this bucket of bolts into the Davalian system. Forget it."

"You're going to have to give me a better answer than that!"

"The Davalians are slavers." Han snapped, as he recognized the determination that had hardened the Alderaanian's pretty eyes. "They've dealt in flesh peddling since they crawled off that dung-heap they call a planet, centuries ago. They can turn a dishonest credit on any creature that walks, crawls, or flies in this system. The little buggers are born mercenaries!"

"Then you whould get along with them just fine."

"I sure in hell can understand them! And I know I don't want anything to do with them."

"They don't deal in humans!"

"So everyone says," Solo admitted reluctantly. "But the Empire has been mining the adjoining worlds in their system for over twenty years now. They use slave labor obtained by the Davalians and they've never been too particular."

"Han Solo," Leia glanced at the uneasy Corellian with growing amusement. "I think you're afraid of them."

Solo stiffened at the woman's teasing words. "I'm *not* afraid of them," he snapped back at the grinning Princess. "But I sure in hell don't plan on spending the rest of my days under ground either."

Leia laughed. "Solo, no Slaver in his right mind would try to peddle a Corellian."

"Well then, I don't have anything to worry about, do I?" He threw her an amused glance. "Have you thought about what they might do to an Alderaanian?"

"This is ridiculous!" Leia retorted. "They don't deal in humans. Besides we're just going through ..."

"Without hyperdrive. If we get in trouble, we have no weaponry," he reminded her curtly. "We couldn't out run a fast bantha. We would be ..."

A red light flashed on the pilot's board and Solo reached for the button. "What else can go wrong?"

He balled a fist and struck the control board. The light remainded on. His co-pilot, strangely silent beside him, studied her console.

"What's our speed?" Solo mumbled as he pressed several switches and re-checked the instrumentation before him.

"Falling, we're loosing thrust."

"Damned!" Solo hit another switch and they felt a momentary surge. It held and steadied.

"That's better. What did you do?" Leia questioned.

"I've engaged the auxillary, but it's putting a strain on the other systems." He glanced across at his co-pilot. "I guess it's time we tested your theory."

"What?"

"We're going throught the Davalian System. We no longer have any choice." He turned, checked his co-ordinates. With jawline determinedly set, he snapped in the new directionals. "Right by Daval; the quickest way in, and I hope, the quickest way out."

Solo shot a look at the Alderaanian senator beside him. "Activate full defensive shielding. I don't want any surprises."

"About the shielding ..." She pushed her seat out of his direct reach. "They said ..."

"Leia, what are you--trying--to ..."

"Han, this is an old shuttle ..."

"You're telling me!"

"We have shielding, of course ..."

"Of course. Why do I get the feeling you're trying to tell me something I don't want to hear?"

"I'm just trying to explain!" Leia snapped in defense. "That heavy--shielding--has never--been fully successful -- on--this--model--"

Leia tightened her hold on the arms of her co-pilot's chair as Solo blew up.

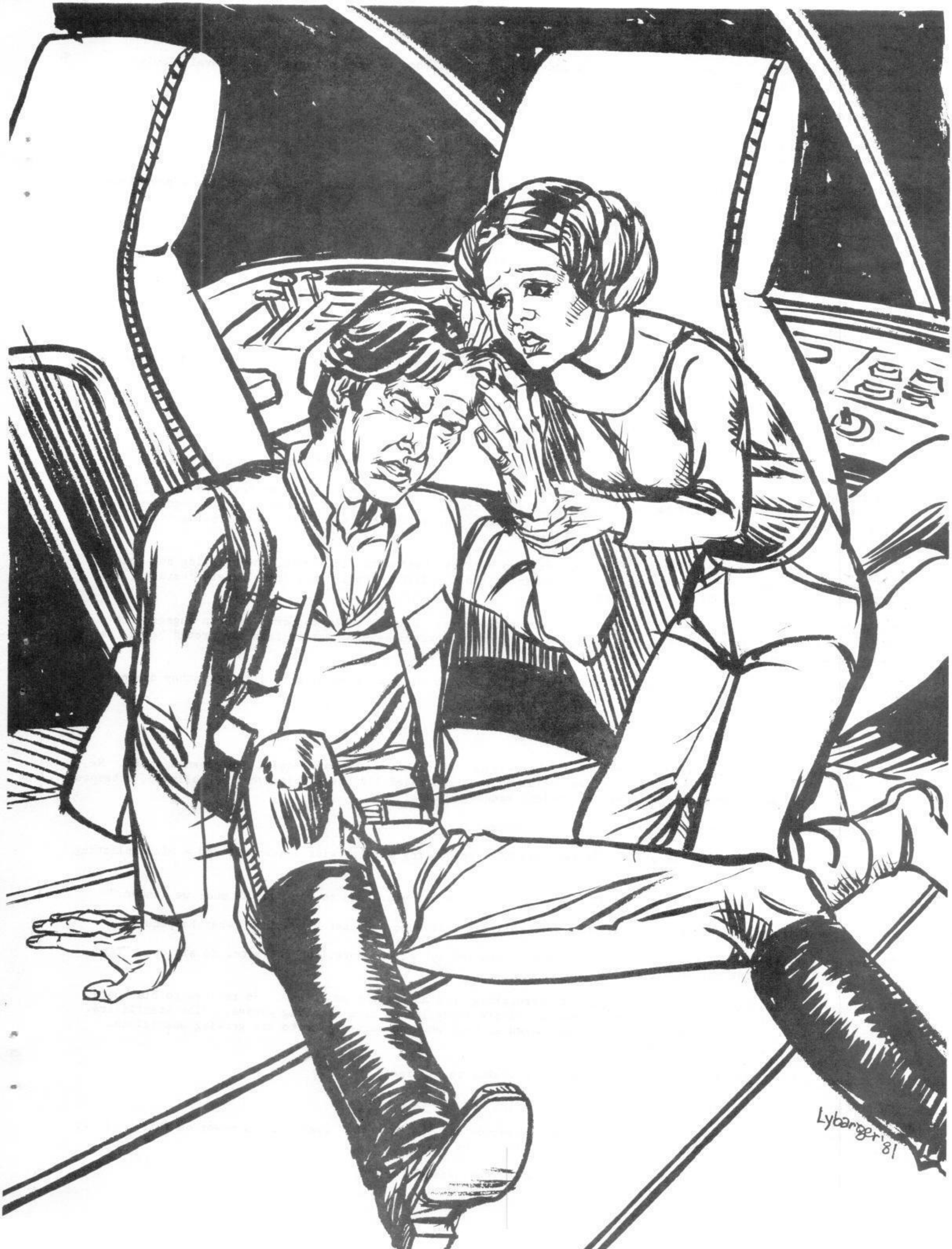
"Why don't we just get out and walk?!" he raved hotly.

"We're holding good speed and Davalian is a small system," she ventured carefully. "there's little travel through this sector. We'll be in and out before they know it."

Solo continued to grumble in ill temper as he watched the starfield through the shuttle's small canopy.

"What did you say?" Leia asked suspiciously.

"I *said* may the Force help Alderaanian fools and Correllian asses who listen to them."


Lybarger '81

"That's what I thought you said," she mumbled and allowed the silence to grow between them. Daval slowly materialized ahead of them.

"Han--" Leia ventured, then checked the board before her again.

"If something else has quit working, I don't want to know about it," he snapped, his uneasiness growing as they approached the small, ugly world in the center of the Davalian System.

With the suddeness of unfullfilled thoughts, the small vessel shuddered violently and settled into a powerless, drifting pattern.

"What the hell?!" Solo jumped to his feet and swept his board with expert efficiency.

"That's what you said you didn't want to know about!" Leia snapped.

"Our main drive?" Solo guessed as he looked across at her board, which had filled with flashing red lights. "Woman, there are times when ..."

"Now, hold on a minute--" Leia swore loudly. "there's nothing I could have done about *that*."

Solo dropped back into the pilot's seat. "How well do you speak Davalian?" he inquired sweetly, as he maneuvered the small craft expertly into a planetary orbit.

"Why?"

"Because you may be doing some quick explaining if I can't fix our drive before we're found."

"I don't think humans can speak Davalian, can they?" she asked, as Han fought the uncooperative yoke.

"How the hell should I know? I know Davalians can't speak Basic, so I guess you'll have to improvise." He again cursed the small ship, as he fought its sluggish controls. "I'm not trusting any more of these systems, I'm going to full manual. When I give the word, hit the retros. By using them along with what braking thrusters we have left, we should get down without killing ourselves."

Leia glanced over her board, her hand hovering over two buttons, both were badly worn, the printing and color obliviated with time and long use. She glanced again at the Corellian, studied his drawn, angry features, and reached for the 'black' button. She waited.

The small ship entered Daval's atmosphere like a wounded womprat, listing badly to port, as Solo engaged the hesitant breaking thrusters. He waited until the small craft hovered several meters from the ground before he nodded to his co-pilot.

Leia hesitated, changed her mind and hit the 'red' button. With the suddeness of most disasters they dropped like a rock.

* * * * * *

"Han? Han?"

The Corellian groaned as a colorful array of pinwheels spun before his awakening senses. He groaned again. He reached for his head, reassured himself it was still there, then carefully opened his eyes. He blinked, attempted to focus on the face that floated before his reeling senses. "Leia?"

"I'm right here. Just sit still for a minute. You've got a nasty bump."

"What--" he blinked again as his vision cleared, his head resounding with growing discomfort and a mind-splitting headache.

"It's okay." She dabbed something cold at his hairline. "You hit your head on the console when we landed."

Solo's brow furrowed in thought as he attempted to pull his last memories past the pain. "What happened?"

"We landed a little hard, that's all," Leia reassured him softly, as the Corellian attempted to sit up. "Take it easy. I don't think you should try to ..."

"I engaged the braking thrusters--" he mumbled, struggling into an upright position. He reached to his board. "They were sluggish, but ..." His eyes widened as memory struggled up from reviving senses. "The stabilizers. Did they go out? That's not possible ..." He looked at Leia when no answer came to his growing suspicions. "I don't remember hearing the retros cut in ..."

He groaned and released his flight belt, struggling weakly to his feet.

"Han, I don't think you should get up."

"The stabilizers. You shut off the *stabilizers*! When you did that you shut down all the power on this tub! It was a red button--you don't hit a *red* button in flight!" he raved.

"The wording was worn! I couldn't tell what it was!" she defended hotly.

Solo sat down, closed his eyes and tried to think happy thoughts. He gave it up. Taking a deep breath and slowly letting it out, he lowered his proud Corellian barriers and called for help.

He closed out his surroundings and concentrated his full mental essence toward Talas 6. It worked for Mall, Chewie's mate, he feverently hoped it would work for him, remembering the Wookiee's gift of telepathy between family members. Well, he reminded himself, Chewie had always said he was part of the clan, about time he put his relationship to the test. He formed mental pictures around a shabby-hulled freighter and focused on the gigantic bulk of the *Falcon's* first mate, projecting his anxious thoughts for himself and Leia to include the astro co-ordinates of Deval.

"Han? Han, what's wrong?" A touch of panic accented the Alderaanian's voice. Solo opened his eyes. "You had me scared to death," she admonished angrily. "Are you okay?"

"I will be, if you promise to leave any more buttons alone."

"Okay, okay, I made a mistake. I'm sorry." Her voice softened. "I *am* sorry. I could have killed us both, I realize that. If I was in doubt I should have asked you."

"If?" Solo mumbled hotly, as he struggled up on shaky legs. "The lady said *if* she was in doubt." He reached out and caught himself against the back of the seat until his reeling senses again steadied.

"I'm trying to apologize!" Leia snapped. "Why are Corellians so damned hard headed?"

"Because Alderaanians keep trying to crack them open on instrument boards!"

"Ahhhh--" Leia moaned through clenches teeth. "What are you going to do now?"

He settled his blaster into its customary position on his right thigh and moved toward the shuttle's closed hatch. "I'm going to check out our main drive system, see if there's anything I can do to fix it, which I doubt. Then I'm going to take a look around."

"I'm coming too."

Solo whirled to face her, his face pinched in growing anger. He pointed a determined finger at her. "No, you are not. Shut up and listen to me!"

Leia's jaw thrust out in belligerency, but she bridled her retort as she read the fury in the hazel eyes of the Corellian.

"You are going to close and lock that hatch after I leave. You are not going to open it until I come back. If anyone comes around this shuttle you are going to stay hidden--out of sight--."

"And if you don't come back?" she snapped.

"You will not leave this shuttle under any circumstances." Solo continued, ignoring her interruption. "You will maintain communication silence and you will *not* do anything that will call attention to yourself or this shuttle."

"Are you finished?" she quipped sweetly.

"I think that covers everything." Solo glared at the small, proud woman before him.

"Good," Leia snapped, hot tempered brown eyes meeting arrogant hazel ones. "Then tell me what I'm supposed to do while you're gone?"

"Pray that I get back before the Davalians find you."

"You've got to be kidding? Are you still trying to scare me with that slavery nonsense?"

Solo threw up his hands in reluctant surrender. "Believe whatever you like, just do what I told you, please."

"Please?" Leai laughed. "I really didn't think that was in your vocabulary."

"Nice." Solo touched the hold-open control and stepped outside. He coughed as he attempted to adjust to the thin air.

"Do you need a respirator?"

"No, it's a little thin, but not bad." He glanced around the barren, ugly landscape. "It's a dung heap ..."

"What if you can't fix the main drive?"

"Don't worry, we might have to spend a day or two on this poor excuse for a world, but help's on its way."

She eyed him suspiciously. "What kind of help?"

"The right kind," he replied, smiling sweetly. "If Gruesome's tuned to my frequencies."

"What?"

"Wookiees have telepathic ties between adult members of their clans and --"

"Yes, yes, I can see the resemblences," she interrupted.

"--over the years, Chewie's developed a finely tuned sensitivity to me and *my problems*," he continued, but not without noticeable irritation.

Slender, well-cared for hands went to nicely shaped hips as Leia smiled benignly at the Corellian spacer. "You'd like me to believe that, wouldn't you?"

"Why not, you believe in the Force!" he snapped. "Well, I believe in Chewie! He'll find us."

"I won't hold my breath," Leia mumbled, but Han had already stretched out on his back and disappeared under the small craft. With anger guiding his already frayed temper, she heard him wrench the cover from the shuttle's main drive systems.

She sat on the edge of the opened hatch and studied the spacer's boots, which was all she could see of the man who wore them. But she could hear him. Her color heightened as the Corellian's well-chosen words described his growing repugnancy for the little craft. She stiffened, expecting to hear her name included in the mumblings of the angry smuggler.

"Well?" she asked tentively, as Solo pulled himself out from under the shuttle.

"I must congratulate you," Solo smiled as he rubbed soiled hands on a rag he had pulled from his back pocket. "You really did a job on her."

"Me?" She climbed to her feet, eager to defend herself.

"When you shut down our systems, *in flight*, you also stripped what remained of the main drive. There's not enough under there to talk about."

Leia groaned and remained wisely silent under Solo's steady gaze.

"I'm going to take a little walk and get my bearings. I may be gone for awhile, so don't worry. I want you to ..."

"I know, you don't have to repeat it. Close and lock the hatch. Don't open it to anyone but you. Hide myself under the seats, cower in fear of slavers until you get back. And stay away from the communications board."

"You listened," Solo smiled. "Now, if you can follow orders ..."

"Listen who's talking!"

* * * * *

Leia's impatience increased as the day waned and still Han did not return. She crossed to the closed hatch again, but turned away and found a seat in the shuttle's small lounge and watched the slow movement of the chronometer. At times, she had found herself wishing it had ceased to function along with the other systems.

She had gone over Solo's parting orders carefully and repeatedly since he had left. She could understand his reluctance to use the communications in seeking help. The ships's gain was strong enough to reach the outer limits of the Davalian system, but no farther. With Imperial networks spread throughout the system on various mining claims, the transmissions would have been easily picked up.

But, if they were to get off Daval, they were going to have to deal with the natives. She concentrated on what she knew of the small aliens. They resembled humanoids to some extent. She remembered having seen holos of them at the base. They had two legs, two arms, a head and a somewhat elongated torso. They were small, barely taller than a Tatooine Jawa, with smooth, almost transparent, skin, lightly covered with silver scales, and a white fur that made them look like a cross between a downy Carnell gosling and a newly scaled Malaian lizard.

Solo had been correct about their livelihood. They were slavers and highly efficient ones. But their system was devoid of humans, so they delt in nonhuman traffic and had prospered greatly dealing with the mining worlds under Imperial rule.

She sighed and glanced again at the chronometer. Only moments had passed since the last time she had looked. She got up and paced the narrow confines of the shuttle.

Telepathic contact between human and Wookiee, she mumbled, *He's so damned sure of himself*. In that moment she made her decision. If they were going to get off Daval, they were going to *have* to deal with the natives.

Han Solo hated and slaver, a simple truth, and he was notoriously suspictious. "He's not about to admit that he's wrong about the Davalians!"

She stepped into the cockpit and glanced out the canopy. In another hour it would be dark. Her mind was made up, she hurried to the back of the shuttle and grabbed up the emergency beacon. Without another thought, she hit the hatch-open control.

In the last light of Daval's day, she watched the distress beacon rotate slowly on its base. With hands on hips, she smiled with satisfaction. Turning, she strolled toward the small grounded vessel, unaware of several small shadows that had appeared between her and her destination.

* * * * *

Han Solo topped the rise and searched the darkened landscape below him. He stiffened as a bright, rotating light flickered out of the darkness toward him. He cursed under his breath as he pulled the holstered blaster from his hip.

"Someday she's going to shock me and do what she's told. Probably *after* she's gotten us both killed." He moved cautiously toward the shuttle. In the flickering light of the beacon he could see that the hatch was closed. He relaxed a little.

He angled toward the darkside of the beacon, keeping out of its light. He reached down and flicked it off. As the beacon blinked into darkness, so did Han Solo, as something heavy descended on his bowed head.

* * * * *

"Sato, they are very strange creatures, are you sure this is wise?" The small Davalian gazed at the reclining figure of the unconscious Corellian. *"We know nothing of them. Are they a sellable commodity?"*

The taller of the two prodded the unconscious human carefully with a long impliment. *"The Hard Shells on our outer worlds are interested in any being who can work in the mines. This one seems strong, young. I feel it is worth our time to try. After all, they cost us nothing."*

"The female?"

"She seems useless and she chatters continually." He glanced almost pityingly at the prone figure. *"Such a strange language. I can make nothing of Basic. The Hard Shells were wise to use mechanicals in our business arrangements.*

"What are your orders?"

"We'll take them both. She should be worth something to the Hard Shells." Sato looked again at the prone figure. *"Check him over carefully. He must be fit for the mines, if he's to be worth the trouble of transport."*

The smaller Davalian looked up helplessly. *"What do I look for?"*

"For wounds, a draining of life fluids." Sato clacked in frustration. *As you would any of our stock prior to delivery."*

* * * * *

A series of strange chirps, clacks and hisses rasped irritably on the raw nerves of Solo's reviving senses. The oblivion in which he floated was comfortable and he longed to pull himself deeper into its pleasant depths, but the strange sounds echoed through the edges of a mounting headache. His brows wrinkled in increasing discomfort.

The clacking continued and his irritation mounted. It ceased and he relaxed in the peaceful silence. Without warning something sharp pierced him and he heard the rending of cloth. Again, he attempted to ignore the frustrating irritation, eager to return to the darkness beyond his awakening awareness.

He started as something moved across the bared flesh on his chest; stopped, probed, then pulled at the hair. Once again the clicking started, tempered with hisses that sounded both worried and curious. His annoyance increased.

"Sato, I fear I have torn his flesh, but he does not bleed!"

"No, no Meete, it's merely a body covering. I have found many such skins in this vessel. It is not important, but do be careful. His flesh seems strangely thin, I fear he is quite delicate."

Sato clacked sympathetically. *"Such little body hair, how strange to always depend on the false skins for protection. Poor creatures. We must handle them carefully, I fear, if they are to survive the transportation."*

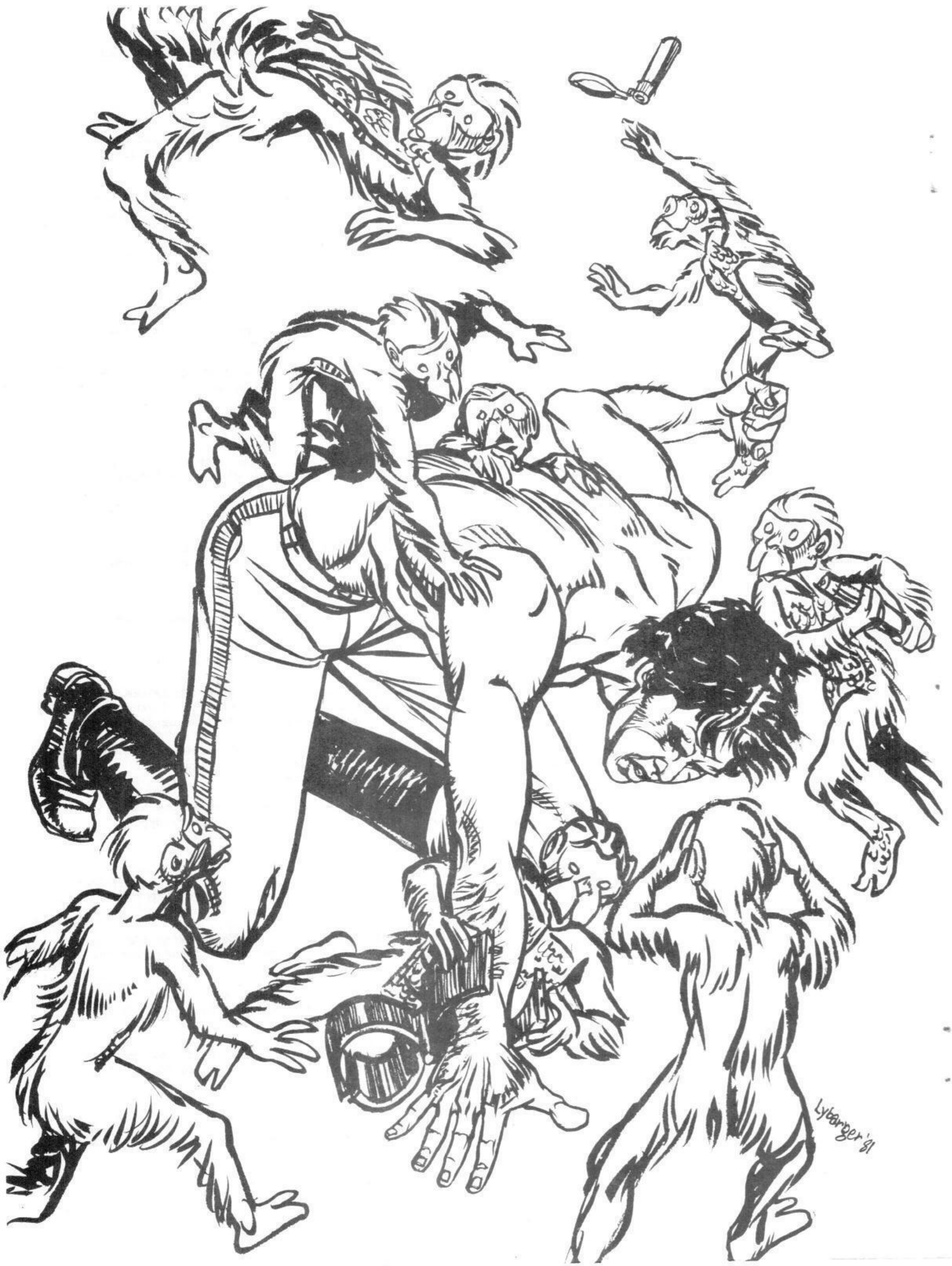
"Do you think it is possible I hit him too hard?"

Sato reached out and prodded the human, unaware of a stiffening at his touch. *"His body remains warm--life is still within him."*

Solo again felt the poke in sensitive ribs and his eyes tightened against the pounding in his head. Once more, he promised himself, and he was going to knock some heads. He didn't feel good and, dammit, he wanted to be left alone! His right hand balled into a fist.

"Sato, movement. Did you see?"

"Yes, he seems to have reacted to my touch. Try again, it may be stimulating his strange circulation in some way."


Lybarger '81

Meete poked an urgent appendage into the Corellian's side and stimulation was complete. Solo reached out and grabbed the Davalian's arm with one hand and the Davalian with the other. *"Sato!"*

The Davalian leader reached out and tapped the pilot with the stick-like implement. Solo released the little native as a hot, sharp electric shock momentarily numbed his arm. More enraged than before, Solo grabbed again for the small, frightened alien. "You little bastard, can't let a guy get a little rest ... " Again the stock poked at him as several other Davalians appeared around him.

"Careful, do not harm him," Sato clicked worriedly as he watched Meete being lifted into the air and flung across the room.

"I am being gentle, Sato," the shaken creature vowed as he scrambled to his feet. *"Perhaps he is having a fit of some sort."*

"Restrain him at once!"

Another small Davalian was hurtled toward Sato and he reached out and touched the human's temple with the probe. Momentarily stunned, Solo fell to his knees and was borne to the ground beneath the weight of several Davalians. He struggled, swearing as Meete clamped binders on his wrists.

"His legs, too, until we can get him confined at the compound."

Solo groaned helplessly as he lay at the feet of the slavers, his head splitting from the mild concussion he had sustained and the agony of the shock pole. "'They don't deal in humans,'" he mumbled hotly as he struggled against the rusted binders. "Wait till I get my hands on a certain Alderaanian .... "

* * * * * *

Leia paced the small confines of her meager cell, her temper rising as she thought of the discomfort she had experienced at the hands of the small aliens. She probed gently at tender places about her body where Davalians had rather roughly satisfied their curiosity of humans.

A smile pulled at her lips as she remembered the satisfaction she had gotten when one had pulled at her nose and she had bitten him. After that, they had lost most of their curiosity for her and she had not been bothered until the move back to the compound.

They had taken Solo alive, and he was obviously awake and feeling his normally belligerent self, for she had seen several of the small creatured leave the dwelling across from hers in several degrees of discomfort. One had practically crawled out of the small covered hovel, another had been limping badly.

She groaned. He was obviously not being diplomatic about their situation. She found herself grateful they had been sepapated. She did not care to guess what the Corellian's attitude toward her would be at the moment. "Why in hell didn't I listen to him? Just because he's always so damned arrogant ... " She gave it up, knowing she would have done the same thing again, if it were to be done over again. Except she would not have left the shuttle unarmed.

* * * * * *

"Meete, how are the humans?"

"Sato, the female has settled in nicely. It is the male that worries me. I cannot fathom his problem."

"Explain. He has not been harmed?"

"No, no, Sato, you have emphasized his worth. We have treated him with utmost care. But he is enraged unnecessarily. He paces across his cell, he attacks without warning anhone who enters, unless he is stunned with the agony pole. He will not eat. He glances across the way at the female's cell, and mumbles strange things and shakes the bars. His unrest and agitation grows."

Sato clicked in irritation. *"It is as I feared. The humans are too delicate for captivity. Yeat I have heard they are adaptable beings. Come, I wish to witness the male's behavior."*

* * * * * *

Sato shook his head in puzzlement as he nervously watched the Corellian. *"He is a mature member of his species?"*

"Yes, Sato, as near as we can tell, from what little we know. He's well developed, his muscles firm, his reactions remarkably quick. We have been hard put to stay out of his reach. Yet we have done nothing to provoke this kind of anger in him."

"Yes, yes, I'm sure of your ability to deal with our stock. But humans," he sighed. *"Perhaps it is the female."*

"Sir?"

"They were together in the small craft. She was waiting for his return. He came to her when he could have found shelter elsewhere. I believe they are a mated pair."

Understanding filtered across the Davalian's features. *"Of course, the male is perhaps approaching his mating time. It would explain his enraged behavior, and the gentleness of the female. You wish them put together?"*

"I believe that should settle him down. Bring her to him, I do not want anyone hurt in attempting to move him in his present condition. After a time together they should be ready to transport to the Hard Shells."

Meete nodded. *"I will be glad to see the last of them. I do not like dealing in stock I do not understand. Humans are far too much trouble."*

* * * * * *

Solo paused in his angry pacing and squared himself off in front of the heavy door. He waited, his hands tightly clenched at his sides, his hazel eyes flashing with an eagerness to get his hands on another of the small aliens. Perhaps, he reasoned, they would leave him and Leia alone if he could continue to keep them off stride.

He glanced at the colorful bruises adorning his chest. The shock weapon had not been spared when he got difficult. But it had lost its effectiveness when he allowed his rage to overrule his anticipated fear.

The door opened and a Davalian stepped cautiously inside, holding him at bay with the pole, while another pushed a small figure into the room. The Davalian quickly backed out and the door closed tightly.

Solo smiled, his eyes sparkling with anticipated pleasure as he moved toward the surprised Alderaanian who stood hesitantly before him. "Oh, they must be mind readers."

"Now, Han ... "

The tall Corellian moved ominously between her and the door, hazel eyes hooded with something Leia wasn't sure she wanted to put a name to. He was stalking her. She edged away from the advancing spacer. "Han, settle down. Let's talk about this sensibly -- " Leia ran to the small bunk, quickly pushing the lone piece of furniture between herself and the enraged Corellian.

"We Corellian men have an old custom I would love to introduce you to, your Royalness," he crooned sweetly as he stopped before the bunk.

Leia moved to the foot of the bed. Han moved to the head. "What are you talking about? Are you all right?" She jumped back as he vaulted the bunk, just avoiding his long-armed reach.

"Back home, we expect our women to have enough sense to know when to do what they're told." He circled the bunk again, his hazel eyes snapping with a growing awareness of his intentions.

"Han, listen to me!"

"I'm listening. Make it good."

"The only way we were going to get off this world was to try to reason with the Davalians." She threw herself across the bunk and again just barely missed his reaching hand. "I was trying to help, damn it! You were gone so long -- " She whirled towards the door, but this time there was no bed between them, and he grabbed her. "Solo, dammit, turn me loose!"

"Not yet, your Royalness. If I'm going to spend the rest of my life in the Imperial mines, I'm going to have some fond memories to keep me going .... "

For the first time, fear touched the royal arrogance of the Alderaanian senator. She struggled violently within his strong grasp. "What are you -- "

"You and I are going to reach a better understanding, Corellian style."

Leia struggled desperately as Solo pulled her relentlessly toward the bunk. "What are you going to do?" Wide brown eyes reflected her fear. "If you lay a hand on me, I'll -- I'll ... "

Solo sat down on the bunk. He grabbed one of her wrists in each hand and pulled until she lost her balance and fell across his lap.

"Han, what -- you wouldn't... "

Oh, wouldn't I!" Solo held her expertly across his knees, and his right hand contacted smartly with the backside of the struggling royal Alderaanian. She screamed in fury and wriggled helplessly under his unyielding hold. His hand rose and fell twice more.

"Maybe next time you'll listen to me!" he said as he released her. Neither human was aware of the two aliens who watched in mounting puzzlement at the barred window of the small cell.

Leia jumped back from the seated Corellian, her hand reaching back to rub the abused portion of her anatomy. She glared at the handsome spacer. "How dare you!"

"And how dare you do your damndest to get us into a life time of servitude?"

Lybarger '81

"You ... you .... "

Solo advanced on her again. "Would you like another session across my knees?"

"Not on your life!" She kicked out viciously, catching him on the shin with a solid blow.

He sat down. Angrily he rubbed the injured spot, while he glared at the small woman before him. "Alderaanians!"

"Corellians!"

Solo touched his shin tenderly. Leia stood arrogantly before him, still rubbing her bruised posterior. His eyes softened. "Okay, I deserved that. Are you all right? They haven't hurt you?" he asked.

Leia shot him a suspicious glance, then relaxed and moved until she stood before him. "No, I'm fine." For the first time she was aware of the discolorations on his bared torso. "What have they done to you?" She reached a gentle hand to the various bruises, hesitating as he flinched under her touch.

"Not half as much as I've done to them."

"I know," she whispered. She avoided the man's searching gaze. "I've seen them leaving here. Han, I'm sorry," she sighed. "You were right, I behaved badly. And if I hadn't disobeyed you we probably wouldn't be here."

Solo's eyes softened, and he patted the bunk next to him.

"No thanks," she declined. "I don't think I'm going to be sitting down for a while. "Why did they put us together anyway?"

Solo shrugged. "I can't figure the little buggers out. I've thrown every one of them out at least once and they keep coming back."

"Meete, what do you make of it?" Sato asked his companion outside the cell.

"A very strange mating ritual. But it seems to have settled him. And the female seems to have handled him easily. Should we leave them together?"

"I believe it necessary. He seems to have satisfied himself. Very strange."

Meete nodded, and the two Davalians moved to the closed door of the cell.

* * * * * *

"Han."

"Stay behind me. They can't take you unless they call in more than these two." Solo moved protectively between the small aliens and the princess.

The Davalian stationed at the window chirped a quick order and one of the frightened creatures advanced to meet Solo. Han took another threatening step toward the small slaver who stood his ground reluctantly. Solo reached for him. The small creature hissed in fear then kicked the Corellian sharply on his already badly bruised shin.

Han swore as his hand closed on the alien. It shrieked loudly, and its companion rushed forward and kicked Solo smartly on the other leg.

It was too much for the already furious Corellian. He picked them up like rag dolls and flung them across the room. They stumbled to their feet, wrenched the door open and fell out of the cell in thier eagerness to avoid contact with the raging Corellian.

Leia Organa held her sides, her laughter bringing tears to her eyes. Solo turned to face her, Corellian oaths turning the Davalian air blue. She fought to catch her breath. "Gods, Han, have pity ... "

"On them? You've got to be kidding. They damn near crippled me!"

"No ... on me. I can't .... "

The lopsided smile pulled at the Corellian's lips as he watched the Alderaanian sheepishly. "It's not that funny."

"Oh, oh -- you're wrong ... "

* * * * * *

"Sato, I truly do not understand. It worked when she applied the punishment."

Sato threw his arms into the air in an almost human gesture of frustration. *"He's worthless. He cannot be controlled. Perhaps the Hard Shells will come for him. There's no way we can move him safely."*

"They will pay less for him if he cannot be disciplined." Meete argued. *"They may not want him at all. And now he has also mated with the female. I fear she is also diminished in whatever value she might have possessed."*

Sato clacked his unhappiness then glanced toward the now quiet cell. *"She probably carries his issue, which are sure to bear his flawed characteristics. We have never erred so badly. It is unprecidented. I am shamed if word of this leaves our compound."*

* * * * * *

The huge Wookiee swore in irritation as he eased the small modified Corellian frieghter into an orbit above the ugly world of Daval. "He says he has no idea why Captain Solo would land here," 3PO translated carefully. He returned the star charts to their place below the navigator's station behind the pilot's seat. "He avoids all slavery worlds."

"The Davalians are slavers?"

"Yes, Master Luke. According to my memory banks, they have dealt in slaves for centuries."

"That's strange," Luke mumbled thoughtfully. "It's not like Han to take a chance like that with Leia along."

Chewie glanced at the young Jedi and eased the freighter toward the planet's surface, motioning Luke toward the T.F.S. systen on his board. Skywalker activated and checked it carefully as they roared over the barren landscape.

"Perhaps Captain Solo was hurt," 3PO ventured, "and they had to land."

Luke watched the instruments as he contemplated the robot's words. "I don't think so, 3PO. I sensed anger, helplessness and worry for Leia, pretty much the same a Chewie said he felt through his telepathic contact with Han. But neither of us sensed any pain or other indication that either of them was hurt." He turned to the massive Wookiee. "You're sure they're here somewhere?"

Chewie nodded knowingly and activated the *Falcon's* shielding to maximum, then tapped the sensors on Luke's board.

"He's found an Imperial mining colony on the northern hemisphere -- "

"Yes, I see it," Luke interrupted, watching the screens closely as Chewie maneuvered the freighter expertly out of enemy sensor range. "The Empire's mining this system heavily, and I'll bet they're using Davalian purchased labor."

Chewie nudged the human's arm, smiling as he banked the ship and sailed over the small grounded vessel that had appeared below them. "I see it," Luke said. "It has to be Han's. It put down as far as he could get out of Imperial sensor range. "Let's take her down."

Luke flipped in the *Falcon's* powerful braking thrusters on Chewbacca's command, then glanced across his board. "I'm getting a reading of life forms not far from the ship; an alien compound, but nothing from the ship. Chewie, let's set down and do a little careful inquiring about strangers."

Chewbacca nodded quick agreement, then voiced a lengthy reply as he glanced from the golden robot to the young Jedi.

"He says Davalians have not been known to deal in human traffic. In fact, tohave any dealings with humans at all. Perhaps, it would be best if he and I questioned them about Captain Solo and the princess."

The freighter settled comfortably on her three-point landing gear and Chewie quickly shut down all systems and sensors.

"Okay, find out what you can. I'll watch from here with the gun batteries fully charged in case there's any trouble."

A small group of Davalians walked to the foot of the ramp, waiting in growing amounts of discomfort for the occupants to disembark.

"Sato, I don't recognize this ship ..."

"No, it's not a ship of the Hard Shells."

Both small creatures fell silent as the 'droid moved toward them, followed closely by the huge anthropoid. They stepped back in reverence to Chewbacca's stature.

"Welcome to Daval, fellow travelers, I am Sato, leader of the Daka slave compound. May I be of service?"

Chewbacca tilted his head to 3PO and roared his greeting and request, while the robot translated.

"You are interested in slaves?" Sato clacked happily. *"Yes, yes, we understand. We are proud of our reputation to provide what is needed. If we do not stock on hand that pleases you, we'll take orders and guarantee our stock at pickup date,"* he spieled from long practice. *"What did you have in mind?"*

Chewbacca pulled thick lips away from sharp teeth and gave Sato a full-mouthed grin, his blue eyes narrowed with studied contemplation and he voiced his desires.

"We are interested in humans; a tall, healthy male and a comely female. Do you have anything in the compound at this time." 3PO translated.

Sato glanced at Meete in shocked amazement, but neither spoke as each realized the possible opportunity that had been offered them

"May I ask what these slaves are to be used for?"

3PO glanced at Chewbacca, translated, then waited before turning back to the small aliens. "General labor."

"Sato," Meete cautioned, *"don't tell them more than necessary to save face. The beast is powerful enough to handle the male, perhaps they need not know about the female."*

"I am an honest being, Meete. I will not lie--any more than is necessary." Sato revised hastily, as he thought of the possibility of being left with the Corellian.

Chewie turned and hailed the ship, his voice sharp with excitement. Luke walked out and joined them. "Do they have them?"

"We believe so, Master Luke, but they seem strangely upset when you came out."

Sato mumbled uneasily to 3PO, gesturing toward the young Jedi.

"They are puzzled, Master Luke, they were prepared to sell to Chewbacca, but now seem undecided. I think they are puzzled over the possibility of human purchasing human."

"So, tell them I'm Chewie's slave and he's looking for more able-bodied humans to add to his crew."

3PO clacked quickly to the small Davalians, then turned back to the boy. "They are pleased. It seems they have just what we need. In fact, they say the female should already be carrying issue from a strong mating to add to Chewbacca's stock."

"What?!"

Chewie placed huge hands on narrow hips, tilted his head to one side and teased the young rebel knowingly, while 3PO translated.

"What do you mean, they had to do something while they were waiting?!" Luke frowned at the Wookiee, who grinned his pleasure at the boy's discomfort.

"Sato, what do we do? The male is uncontrollable. We cannot bring him out. When the beast sees his madness he may not want him or his mate."

Sato waved Meete's fears aside. He stepped forward to address 3PO. *"We are honest businessmen,"* Satio explained. *"We have what you want, but I fear the male is beyond our control."*

"What's he saying?" Luke frowned at the golden 'droid.

"He says the male can't be handled. I get the impression they are afraid of him."

An amused look that turned to pity touched the Tatooin's features. For the first time he really looked at the group of small aliens. There were several limping badly, another seemed disoriented, as if he had come into contact with something hard. As a group, the small band looked as if they had fought a war and lost.

"The male did this?"

"He must be a mad man. It can't be Captain Solo!"

"What was this mating nonsense?"

"They thought he was being driven by the mating fever of his species," 3PO explained, but paused obviously puzzled. "I show no such information on humans in my memory banks, Master Luke."

Luke waved him on impatiently. "Go on."

"They put the female in with him to settle him. They are bewildered, it seems to have made him worse."

Luke chuckled. "It's Han, it's got to be. They're suffering from a bad case of Corellian. And I'll bet he's suffering from a mild epidemic of Alderaanian. 3PO, tell them we'll buy the humans -- both of them."

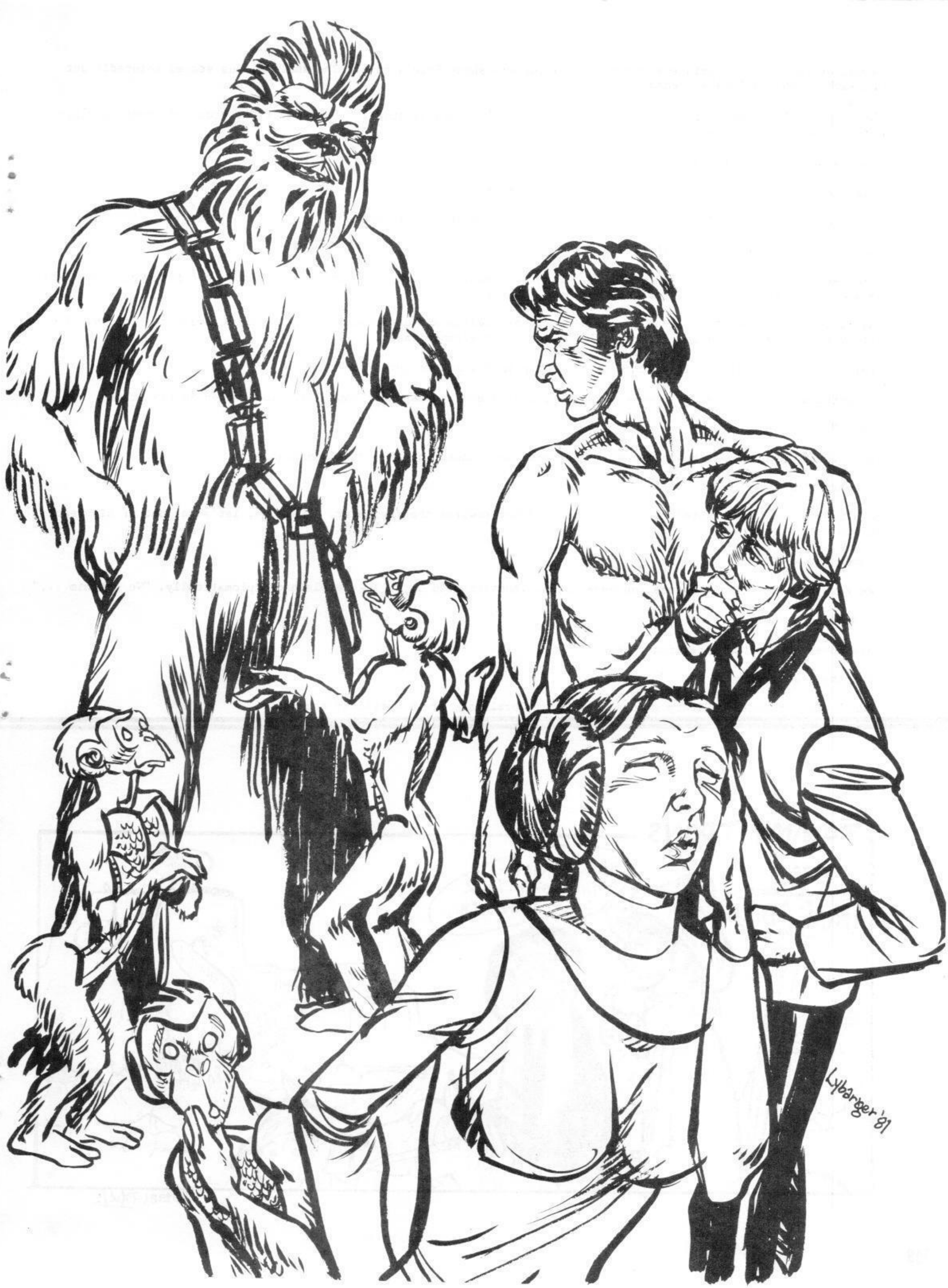
Sato held up a restraining hand as 3PO translated and clicked a hesitant inquiry.

"Sure." Luke turned to Chewie, but the *Falcon's* first mate was already trotting toward the small cell. Luke ran to catch up.

Chewbacca pulled the door open, roared loudly, then stepped aside. Han Solo leaped at the huge Wookiee as the two met, embraced and circled in a strangely macrabre dance of greeting.

"You did it! You found us!" The Corellian slapped the Wookiee's back affectionately.

"Luke, how ..."


Lybarger '81

Skywalker embraced the princess, then reached out and shook Solo's hand. The small aliens stayed pointedly out of reach of the half-naked human.

"Let's get out of here before I start taking the little bastards apart." Solo swept the group of cowering aliens with a glance of promised mayhem.

"Just a minute, Chewie's settling up ..."

Solo's eyes hardened. "What do you mean, 'settling up'?"

"They're business men, Han," Luke reminded him. "We bought your freedom."

"Let me get my hands on the little ..."

"Han, settle down." Luke stopped him with an urgent hand. "There's an Imperial operation not far from here. What do you say we get out of here before they come looking."

Chewbacca handed the small alien leader a packet of credits and motioned the three humans toward the *Falcon*. The delicate creatures bowed low, a grateful look on their strange faces.

"Well, Gruesome, what did it cost us to get the princess and me out of hock?"

A gleeful expression touched Chewie's gentle features and he responded happily. Solo stopped in his tracks.

"What?"

3PO blinked in an almost human manner. "He said the transaction was quite reasonable."

"I heard him!"

Leia frowned as Luke grabbed her arma nd started her towards the freighter. "Come on, let's get out of his reach before he finds out ..."

"Finds out what?"

"We got you half price, because you were ...uh...contaminated ..." Luke explained diplomatically. "We got him ..."

"What!" Solo shouted.

Leia moved out of the Corellian's reach.

"Nothing! They *gave* me away!"

"Han," Luke chuckled. "Every good slaver knows Corellians are a worthless commodity."

TOMMY TOONS
MASADA
uh... AVRAM...
THIS DON'T Look LIKE ARIZONA...
We are not alone!
COME DOWN!
NO WAY!
OY SHIIIIT!
BOING
SILVA! SILVA! SILVA!
FALCO!

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Farewell Dialogue

LYNNE TERRY

Han? Is it dawn already?

Yeah. I wanted to say goodbye before I left.

Do you have to leave? Can't you stay a while longer?

Baby, I got places to go, people to see. I'd stay if I could, but I can't. I gotta move on.

It's been a good two weeks, Han.

Yeah, it has. I'll miss ya.

I'll miss you, too. When ...

Look for me when you see me comin'. I can't give you any more than that.

I know, and I will. Fly free, spacer man. I love you enough to let you go.

I know, lady. And that's why I love you.

* * * *

He's gone now. I saw him out the door, kissed him goodbye -- a long kiss it was -- and wished him well. I shed no tears, for a person does not weep over the freedom life gives to someone else.

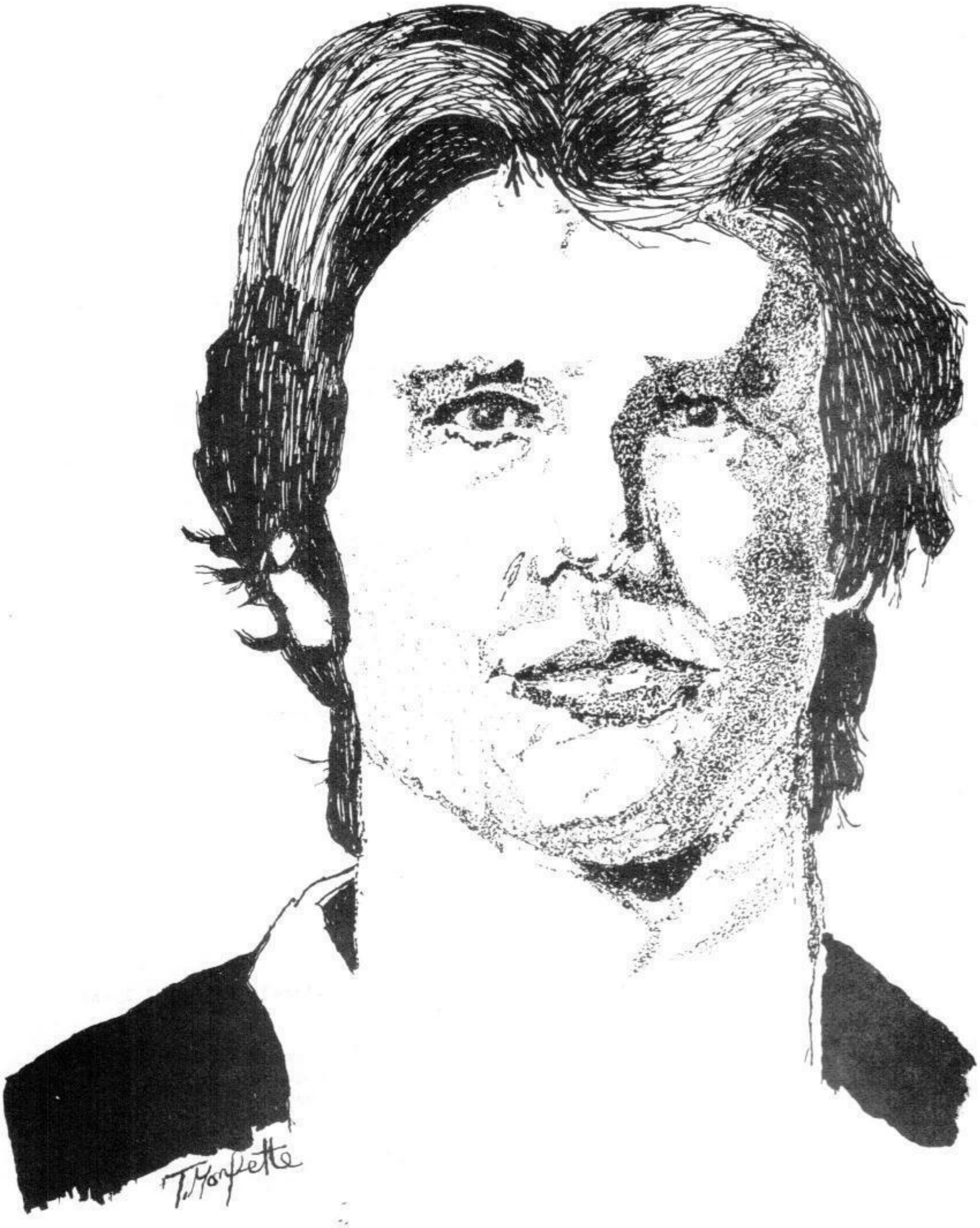
My Han's a smuggler captain, and this I know well. The *Falcon* is his first love and his home away from me, but I am not jealous. She takes him on runs from one end of the galaxy to the other, keeps him away for months at a time; and still I am not jealous. You see, I may give Han his freedom, but it is the *Falcon* that gives him his wings.

My Han is also a gambler, a liar and a scoundrel, but I really can't complain. He's always good to me and though we may scream and fight from time to time, he never raises a hand to me. No angel is my Corellian, thank the gods! I'll take a scoundrel any day.

The sky shakes with a roar as a ship takes off. It's the *Falcon;* I know her engines. I smile as I watch out the window as she lifts gracefully to the wind, then I turn away.

It'll be a while before he returns, perhaps months; and though I will miss his presense in my house -- his low, vibrant voice in my ear, and my bed cold without him at my side at night -- I shall not curse the stars that keep him from me. They beckon seductively to him, whispering their eternal white starshine promises; and keeping every one. For my heart rejoices in the joy he has found among them.

So farewell, Han, my love. Let freedom be your namesake and the stars your guardians until we meet again.


T. Monfette

The Ballad of Han Solo

His eyes glittered coldly as he took in Old Ben,
His appraisal was quick and precise.
He knew the old man was quite desperate,
He could ask for any price.

He smiled and nodded at Chewie;
His partner was quick to agree.
The Jedi was good for the money,
That he could easily see.

He wasn't quite sure of the kid Luke,
The boy was too mouthy and green,
But the risk he might bring would be worth it,
He'd get enough cash to start clean.

Perhaps in a glimpse of the future,
He saw his new fate had been dealt.
But his stubborn, Corellian spirit
Wouldn't let his old confidence melt.

He travelled through hell on the journey,
And many times cursed his bad luck.
He'd gotten himself in a maelstrom,
And once in the middle, was stuck.

Because of his misguided courage,
Because of his maniac deeds,
The Princess and freedom were rescued,
And stormtroopers mown down like weeds.

The brave Captain Solo was willful
But new friends helped straighten him out.
As he stood with young Luke in the temple,
Rebels hailed his brave deeds with a shout.

by

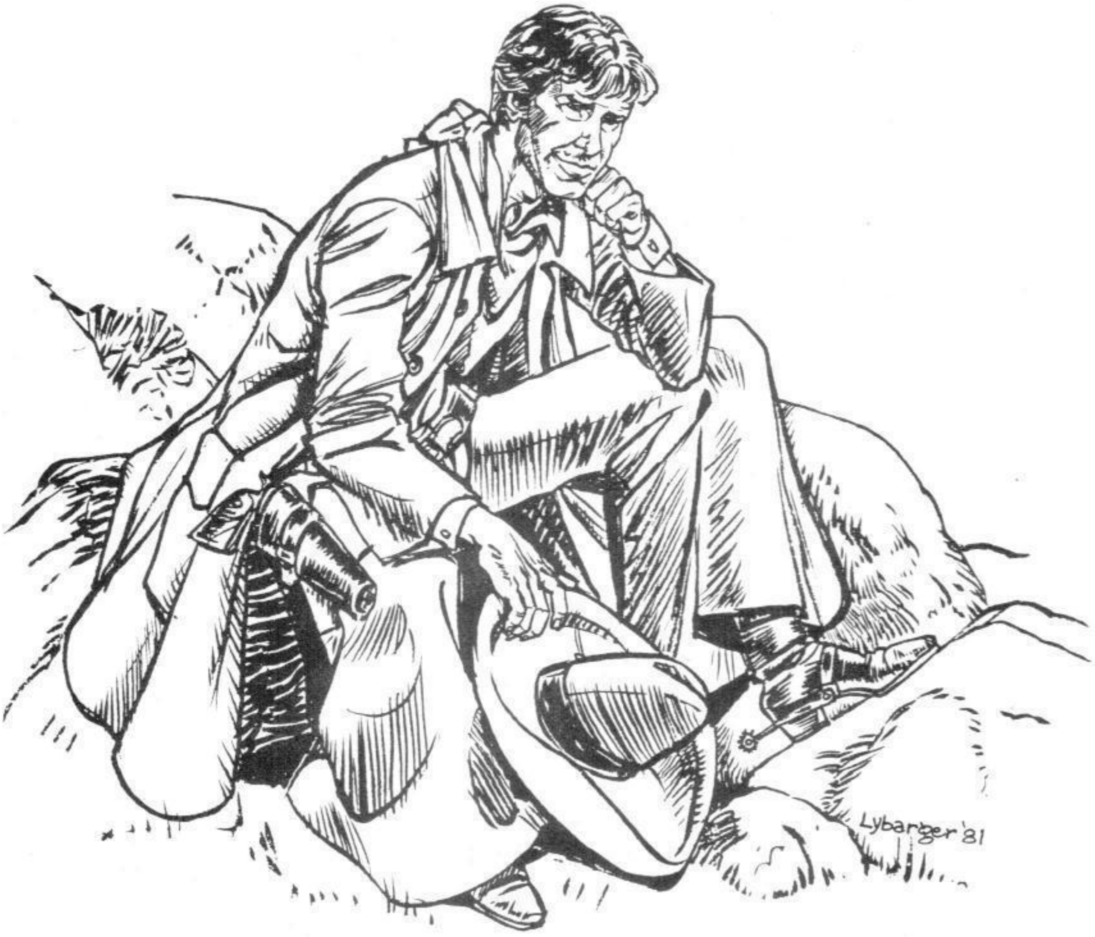
Tammy

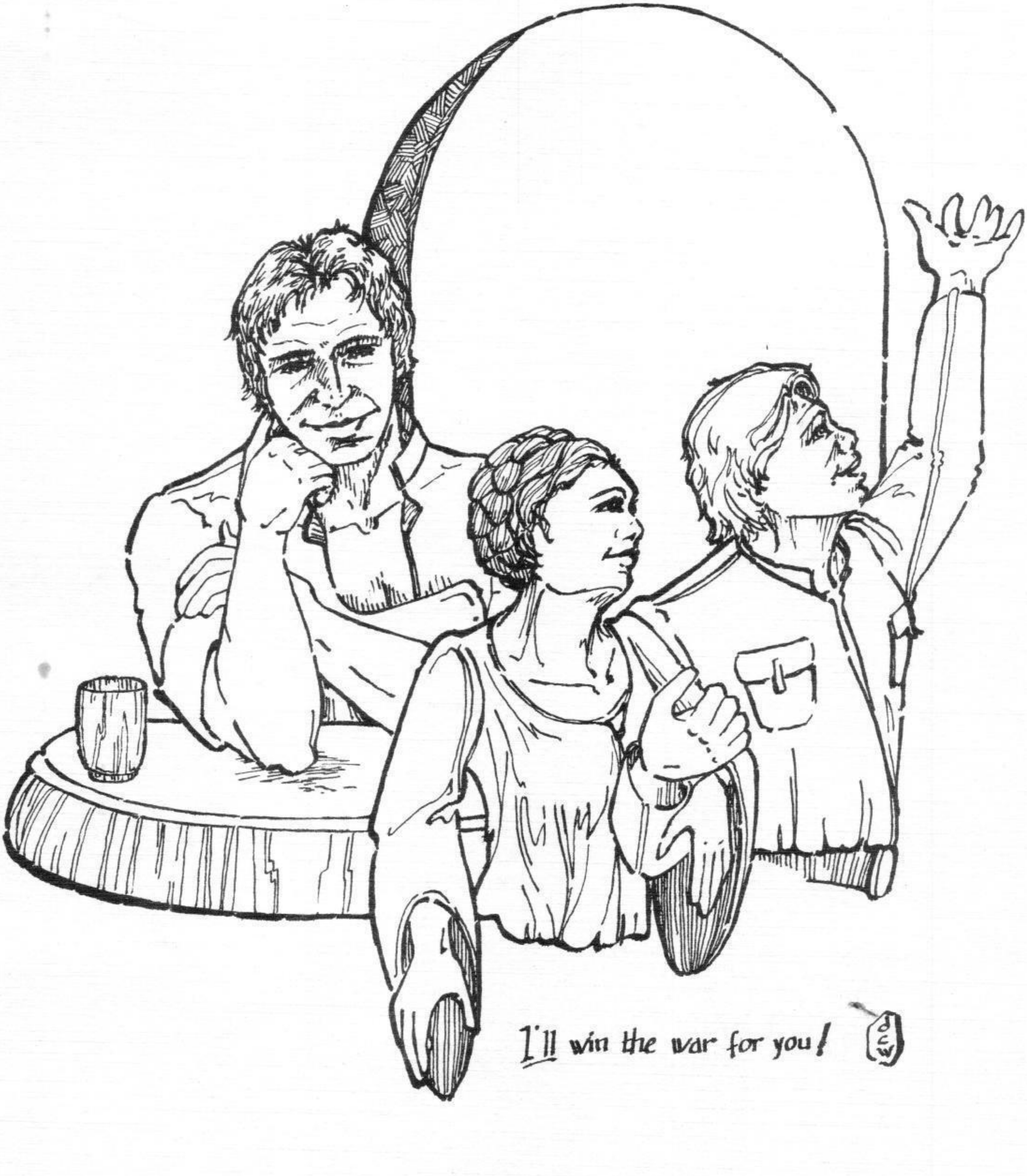
Monfette

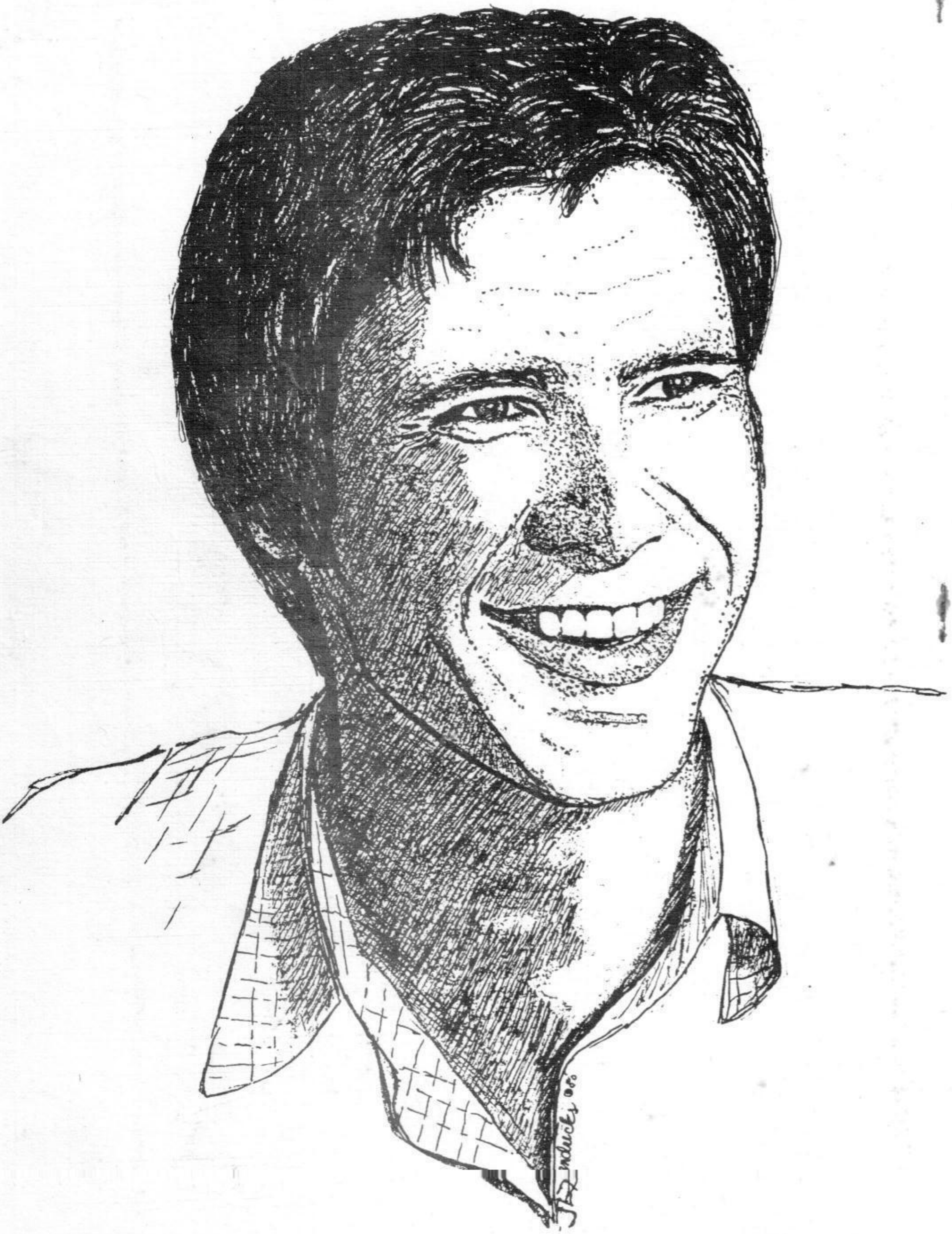
Thoughts

Kelly Hill

Out on the trail, you spend a lotta time thinkin'.
Stars shinin' down just make you want to do that, I guess.
Out here, wild and lonely, nobody but me and my horse --
And mebbe an Injun or two I ain't spotted yet --
Well, it makes me think back a ways, not so long ago,
Back to when I came to places like this to hide
And keep my skin in one piece when posses were out,
Or sometimes even husbands and brothers with grudges,
And all of 'em lookin' to hang my hide from a tree.
Like I say, it wasn't very long ago, but now
Things are different. I ain't on the run anymore,
And you know, I kinda like the feelin' of it.
Wonder if mebbe it was all sorta ... planned, 'tween Avram and me?
I ain't never been fool enough to think I know it all,
So could be there's some sense in that. I dunno --
All I'm sure of now is that I got friends, and roots,
And somebody to miss me when I go. Like I said,
Out on the trail, you spend a lotta time thinkin',
And that's the kinda thoughts make a man real glad
To be alive, and to be goin' home again.





I'll win the war for you! dcw